First published .	. *January,*	*1922*
Second impression	. *February,*	*1922*
Third impression	. *May,*	*1922*
Fourth impression	. *September,*	*1922*
Fifth impression	. *February,*	*1924*
Sixth impression	. *November,*	*1925*

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PART I

CONTENTS

Consideration for the feelings of certain of the people concerned has hitherto prevented the publication of this narrative. The proceedings of Mr. Francis Mandell-Essington on a previous and somewhat similar occasion were confided to the public a number of years ago in the form of a chronicle (sometimes mistaken for a work of fiction, so curious were some of the incidents) which went under the title of "The Lunatic at Large." Having carefully investigated these fresh facts, and at last received permission to make them public, the same annalist will now endeavour to set them down as concisely and intelligibly as possible.

INTRODUCTORY

Mr. Miths (at his special request his real name has been slightly, but it is hoped, sufficiently, altered) happens to be an old acquaintance of the present chronicler, and a gentleman of a singularly tenacious and accurate memory. His recollections of a conversation overheard in the Regent's Club in Pall Mall one September evening in the year 1896 are of such importance in elucidating the strange series of events which followed, that this narrative had better begin with that curious episode.

The roadway of Pall Mall was up, the leaves in the park were beginning to show a tinge of russet, and all good clubmen were still out of town. Mr. Miths was merely passing through on his way from a friend's place in Sussex to another in Norfolk, and as he had been tramping the turnips all day under a warm sun and finished up with an excellent dinner at the club and a pint of champagne, he was not at all sorry to find hardly a fellow-

member in the house to disturb his after-dinner nap. To make doubly sure he sought out the small smoking-room on the second floor, whither few people at any time penetrated. He found the room in darkness and switched on the light nearest the door, but the farther end, where a wide and comfortable sofa faced the fire-place, he left in slumber-inviting obscurity. And then he threw himself down on the sofa and in three minutes fell fast asleep.

He considers that it must have been about half an hour afterwards when a pleasant dream of partridges, pork pie and bottled beer was sharply interrupted. Some one at the other end of the room seemed to have uttered an exclamation, but nobody was speaking when he first opened his eyes. Then in an instant he heard a voice say:

"I am aware it is most awkward, Harry, but what can one do?"

The voice was familiar, yet he could not fit it with a name. Certainly it was not a young man's voice.

"Awkward!" said the other voice sardonically. "Do you realise what it means for us?"

This voice he did not recognise. He had never heard it in the club, and he deduced a stranger; also, from the tones, a younger man.

"And whose fault is that?" asked the first voice.

Mr. Miths was startled by the tone. Something very serious must have happened to agitate the speaker. The conversation was evidently going to be embarrassing, and for a moment he was on the point of jumping up and revealing himself. But before he could move, the other man spoke again.

"We needn't go into that again," he said. "I admit I was rash, but at the same time I was cursed unlucky. The point is now that she is our only chance. I tell you again, this affair must be stopped! You can stop it perfectly easily."

Uncomfortable though he felt, the listener on the sofa decided that the position would only be the more embarrassing if he revealed himself now. If they discovered him, he could easily pretend to be still fast asleep, and if not, he could trust his own discretion not to repeat what he had overheard.

"But, Harry, you keep forgetting Francis——"

The other interrupted impatiently.

"It's you who keep forgetting that he is safely out of our road. That's our one piece of luck."

"But I hear he is getting better," said the other man; curiously enough not in a tone

that seemed to suggest any pleasure in the news.

The man called Harry answered in a lowered voice, so that only some words were audible from the sofa.

"I'll see to it . . . won't get out . . . affair settled first . . . only you with any say in the matter . . . just give me my chance . . . you be firm, that's your part."

The listener caught these words, and then for a few moments heard nothing more. Yet the same speaker must have been saying something, for suddenly the other man exclaimed:

"A maid?"

"Don't shout," said the other and then answered in a low voice, "A reliable maid will be worth any money. I can arrange . . ."

Again his voice sank, but he seemed to go on talking quickly and yet thoughtfully, like a man who planned as he spoke. When he ceased, the other answered nothing for a moment, and then spoke low and guardedly.

"Are you sure it is quite necessary?"

"Can you suggest an alternative?"

"Are there no other developments in the City?"

"All bad," said the younger man briefly. "We've got to bring this thing off. Well, that was all you had to tell me?"

"Yes, Harry. I'm sorry it was bad news."

"It will have to be altered!" said the man called Harry.

They were moving towards the door now, and just as they were passing out, the listener on the sofa ventured to raise his head and take a swift peep at them. The elder man had already gone out and the other was in the doorway. He was tall, dressed rather resplendently for the occasion, in full evening clothes and white waistcoat, and his hair was black and wavy—almost curly in fact. Of his face the watcher on the sofa could only see enough to judge that he was a handsome man probably in the middle thirties. And then the door closed behind them and he was left to keep his secret; which he has faithfully done down to the date of the publication of this narrative.

PART I

THE LUNATIC AT LARGE AGAIN

CHAPTER I

Mr. Perry's Client

Mr. Perry, of Bannerman, Perry & Haines, gazed for a moment at the visiting card which the clerk had just handed in. He was an elderly young man, very grave and solemn for his six and thirty years, thin-faced and carefully dressed; an ideal-looking adviser in a delicate matter. The card was his brother's "introducing my friend Mr. Ridley," and to Mr. Perry it appeared to be a dubious introduction. His brother was a spirited young gentleman who frequented the more western regions of London, and seemed unlikely to send his friends to the family office unless they had got into a very serious scrape indeed.

"Show him in," said Mr. Perry briefly,

and composed his face into an expression of even greater austerity than usual.

The door opened, and there entered not one, but two young gentlemen. The first was a little above medium height, slim but very well set up, immaculately dressed, and even to Mr. Perry's critical eye decidedly pleasing to look upon. His features were good, his mouth firm and businesslike, and his eyes quiet, clear and steady.

"I am Ridley," said he, "and this is my friend, Mr. Toothill."

The second young man smiled affably and remarked that it was a "devilish warm day." He was probably of nearly the same height as Ridley, but so broad that he looked decidedly shorter. His face was ingenuous and good-humoured, pug-nosed, genial, obstinate, but not at all intellectual; whilst his attire reached the very limit of the very latest fashion.

"Sit down," said Mr. Perry, and then after one quick shrewd glance at both his visitors, decided it would save valuable time to come straight to the point.

"Got into a scrape?" he inquired with his nearest approach to a genial manner.

"No," said Ridley, "not in the least."

Mr. Perry glanced again at each of them in turn and raised his brows a trifle.

"I may remind you that I am a criminal solicitor," said he.

"I know you are," said Ridley. "That's why we have come to you. We want your advice."

For a single instant there showed through the young man's restrained well-bred voice a hint of some strong emotion, and Mr. Perry pricked up his ears.

"Ah!" said he in quite a different manner. "Well, what's the trouble?"

"I'm afraid it is rather a long story," said Ridley, "but I had better make things clear and begin at the beginning."

"Much better," murmured the lawyer.

"This summer, in fact only about a couple of months ago, I was travelling on the Continent——"

"I was with him," put in Mr. Toothill.

"I should have said that we were travelling," Ridley corrected himself. "We began with Switzerland and meant to go a good bit farther east, but in an hotel at Lucerne we met a Madame D'Albert, a lady who keeps a sort of finishing school for girls in Paris——"

"I have heard of her," said Mr. Perry, "a very high-priced establishment, I believe"

"Yes, so I should think. She had taken two or three of her girls with her for a

holiday before they came home, and one of them was a Miss Beatrix Staynes. I—er—well, I became engaged to her."

Mr. Perry smiled slightly. "That is a very brief account of the transaction," said he. "If any part of your subsequent story hinges upon it, you had better give me a few more details."

"She was very beautiful and very charming," said Ridley simply, "and I fell in love with her." He suddenly smiled for an instant and added: "Personally I don't see how anyone could help it."

"No more do I," said Toothill with a sigh, and then seeing the lawyer's eye turn in his direction, he explained with engaging candour, "I fell in love with her too, but Philip was the lucky bird. But that accounts for my bein' here with him, as you'll hear in a minute."

"Unfortunately she was very rich," Ridley went on.

"Unfortunately?" repeated the lawyer sharply.

"Well, I mean that she is very much richer than I am or ever will be, and one loathes the idea of fortune hunting. Besides, I am not sure that it may not account for what has happened since. She was an orphan, I should say, with no near relations,

and two guardians. Beyond an allowance stipulated in her father's will, they have absolute control of her money till she is twenty-five. In fact if she marries before then without their consent she loses all."

"Do you know what her fortune amounts to?"

"Madame D'Albert spoke of £20,000 a year, but very likely she exaggerated."

The lawyer nodded.

"Very possibly. Still, it is clear that she is extremely wealthy. And what is the attitude of her guardians towards her engagement?"

"You can judge of the attitude of one of them from what I am going to tell you," said Ridley with some significance. "By the time we were actually engaged, well, it was only three weeks ago; and she was coming home to England so soon that we first decided to wait till she arrived in London and see the guardians then. A little later, however, she told me in a letter that she had written after all to break the news, but that was just before she started and there has been no time for me to hear the answer—that's to say, to hear it from Beatrix. I came home ahead of her, went down to the country to see my people for a day or two, and then came back to town and waited for her. Of

course we were corresponding regularly, and it was all arranged that she was to arrive at Charing Cross three days ago by the Continental train getting in at 9.0 p.m." At this point Ridley paused and looked at the lawyer very straight and frankly, while the lines of his mouth set firmer than ever. "This is where the strange part of the story begins,' said he, "and if you think anything wants clearing up, you can ask me as I go along."

"In that case," replied Mr. Perry, "I should just like to ask you whether Miss Staynes was travelling to England by herself or with friends."

"She was going to travel with a friend, another girl from Madame D'Albert's, and then she wrote and told me that she had changed her plans. She was getting a maid, she said, and was travelling home with her. First of all I thought of going over to escort her—I wish to Heaven I had!—but we were both of us particularly anxious not to do anything her guardians might disapprove of, and as they had made this arrangement about getting her a maid and altering her plans, I decided not to go over but simply to meet her at Charing Cross.

"I got to the station pretty early, and in a few minutes, much to my surprise, Mr. Toothill turned up."

Mr. Toothill finding himself thus the centre of interest for the moment, looked exceedingly serious, and in a voice which he apparently desired to be melancholy, confessed:

"I honestly couldn't help it, Mr. Perry, I know it sounds like pushin' my nose in where it wasn't sort of expected. In fact, it *was* pushin' my nose in; but the truth is I wrote to her asking if there was any chance of my seein' her again—perfectly platonically, of course, perfectly platonically. She wrote such a kind note back—damned kind. And so I came down to meet her. Rotten thing to do, I know quite well; still, just as well I came, as things turned out."

The ghost of a smile flickered for an instant over Mr. Perry's grave face.

"I quite understand," he said, "well, what happened next?"

"We paced the platform together," Ridley continued, "till close on the time when the train was due. By then, of course, a lot of other people had collected, and so we never noticed where the man appeared from or whether he had been hanging about for long: in fact, the first thing we knew was hearing a voice at our back saying:

"'Beg pardon, sir.'

"We turned round and saw a small

weaselly-looking fellow in a bowler hat that looked a little too big for him, with a narrow face and uncommon sharp eyes set rather close together. His voice was hoarse and a little hushed and confidential, and his manner most respectful.

" 'Is one of you gentlemen Mr. Ridley?' he asked.

"I said I was, and he handed me a folded slip of paper.

" 'This note's for you, sir,' said he.

"Outside was simply written, 'For Philip.' Inside was this message—

'*Arriving Victoria* 9.15 *instead of Charing Cross. Meet me there. Beatrix.*'

"The first thing I did was to look at my watch. It was nearly 9.0 o'clock. Then I handed the note to Toothill, and asked the man:

" 'How did you get this?'

" 'Came in a letter to Miss Scott,' said he.

" 'Who is she?' I asked.

" 'Friend of Miss Staynes, sir. Miss Staynes asked her to 'ave it sent on to you.'

" 'But why didn't I get it sooner?' I asked him.

" 'Can't say, sir,' said he, perfectly glibly and naturally. 'I made all the 'aste I could.'

"At that moment Charles—that's to say, Toothill—reminded me that we had no time to lose if we meant to get to Victoria at 9.15. And on top of that the man, in a very brisk, obliging way, asked:

"'Get you a cab, sir?'

"I am telling all these details, Mr. Perry, to show how artfully the thing was done and how I was rushed into a decision with no time to think it over. I was vaguely suspicious from the very start, and I could have kicked myself afterwards for falling into the trap, but there was that note, and I remembered that there was, or had been, a Miss Scott, a friend of Beatrix's at Madame D'Albert's; what could I do?"

Mr. Perry was listening very intently now. He merely nodded and asked:

"So you got into the cab?"

"We did, and drove at full speed to Victoria."

"Very natural. And then what happened?"

"The moment we stopped, I leapt out and asked the first porter which was the platform for the Continental train.

"'There's no Continental trains at Victoria to-night,' said he."

Mr. Perry sat up sharply.

"What!" he exclaimed, and then gave a

little whistle. "Well," he added, falling back into his dry, watchful manner, "what did you do then?"

"We came back to Charing Cross at a gallop—and got there just too late. Miss Staynes had arrived; we found the porter who had put her boxes on to a cab. They were in charge of a maid, and the porter swore that a small man in a bowler hat had helped to pile them on the cab, and then jumped in beside the maid. They seemed in a great hurry, he said. A girl answering to the description of Miss Staynes had spoken to the maid for a moment and then driven away in a hansom. She was met by a tall man in a fur coat, and he went with her. We saw them leaving as we arrived at the station."

"You actually saw them?"

"We couldn't be sure at the moment. It was quite dark and we only caught a glimpse as they passed under a lamp. I couldn't believe it was really Beatrix! But it must have been."

"Did you recognise the man she was with?"

Ridley shook his head.

"We scarcely saw his face. I couldn't even swear to him if I met him again."

"Did you expect her to be met by

anyone else but yourself?" asked Mr. Perry.

"She told me in the last letter I got from her that she had informed her guardian when she would arrive, but added that I was to meet her and take her to an hotel or wherever else he suggested. But I had no time to hear what he said in answer to that."

"Who is this guardian?"

"As I told you, there are really two, but the only one that counts and who corresponds with her and looks after her affairs and so on, is Sir Joshua Horsham, a big financial magnate, I believe."

"Of Horsham and Stukley?" Mr. Perry seemed interested and impressed. "I know the firm, and Sir Joshua too, very well by repute,—excedingly well. In fact, Horsham and Stukley is one of the best-known firms in the City."

"So I understand," said Ridley, "and the very first thing I thought of was to go and see him immediately."

"You couldn't have done better," said Mr. Perry.

"I knew from Beatrix that Sir Joshua is a widower and lives nowadays at his place in Berkshire most of the time. When he is in town he stays at the Regent's Club in Pall Mall, so we went straight to his club from the

station, on the chance of finding him. The porter first told me confidently he was in the club, and went to look for him. Then he came back and said he had been mistaken."

"Deuced fishy, I call it!" observed Mr. Toothill.

"What was your next step?" asked the lawyer.

"I went down next day to Sir Joshua's place," said Ridley, "but I found it clōsed, and the housekeeper in charge either couldn't or wouldn't tell me anything. I noticed however that she showed no surprise at seeing me. Then I wrote to Sir Joshua and told him exactly what had happened."

"Have you got his answer?"

"It came this morning. He refuses his consent to my marriage with Beatrix and forbids any correspondence with her. I had written to her at the same time, and as I knew no other address, I had to address my letter care of Sir Joshua. He returned it, unopened, in his own."

"And not a word about what has become of Beatrix!" exclaimed Toothill indignantly.

Ridley merely confirmed this by a quiet nod and a tightening of his lips.

"But surely, Mr. Ridley," answered the lawyer, "you can set your mind at rest on one point. You told Sir Joshua of Miss

Staynes' disappearance, and he made no comment. That implies she is safely in her guardian's charge."

"Is she?" said Ridley, and his voice, though quiet and controlled, was tense with anxiety. "That man who met her was not Sir Joshua!"

"You are certain?"

"Perfectly. Both from our glimpse of him and the guard's description, he was too tall and too young. In fact, it certainly was *not* Sir Joshua Horsham."

The lawyer was silent for a moment, and then he said:

"One must face every fact, Mr. Ridley, and one fact—unpleasant though it must be to you—is that she herself wrote the note which sent you to the wrong station."

"It was a forgery! I am sure of that now," exclaimed Ridley. "The writing deceived me at the time, but I have studied it carefully since, and I am quite certain Beatrix never wrote it herself."

Mr. Perry opened his eyes.

"But that would imply a very discreditable plot indeed, a plot with a certain criminal element."

"It does; and that is why I feel so anxious."

Again Mr. Perry thought for a moment.

"I don't know whether it is possible to obtain an accurate estimate of a young lady's character from her fiancé, but it would be of considerable assistance if it were possible."

"I can assure you of one thing," said Ridley emphatically. "Beatrix may have her faults—I suppose she has, though I haven't learned them yet—but deceit is the very last thing she is capable of. In fact, she is almost too simple and honest and confiding. She believes people too easily, and is far too slow to suspect them of bad motives—or even of ordinary selfish, worldly motives. Madame D'Albert impressed that on me. 'Never deceive Beatrix,' she said, 'for she will find it very difficult even to understand why you did it.'"

"She is like an angel!" said Charles Toothill earnestly. "I mean, so far as being capable of being stuffed up by any damned yarn goes, and never even pulling your leg herself—or, anyhow, only pulling it gently."

"I am afraid I can only take your word as to the nature of angels," said the lawyer, "but Madame D'Albert's evidence—though only hearsay—is undoubtedly important. In fact, it seems to me tolerably convincing."

"And perhaps you can imagine how I feel with such a confiding girl in the hands of the people who forged that letter," said Ridley.

"I do realise; yes," said Mr. Perry. "But at the same time she has made no complaint, and she is in the hands of her own legal guardians. . . ." He broke off and asked suddenly, "But what about the other guardian?"

"Ah!" said Ridley. "That was the idea I had in my mind; to go and see him about it."

"Who is he?" asked the lawyer.

"A Mr. Francis Mandell-Essington."

CHAPTER II

THE ONE GOOD CARD

"MR. MANDELL-ESSINGTON?" repeated the lawyer. "The name seems familiar. Who is this gentleman?"

"I believe he is a man of means," said Ridley, "with a place somewhere in the country; but the fact is, Beatrix has never seen him or had any correspondence with him, so that he was a mere name to her. Sir Joshua was the guardian she always spoke of to me; but Essington seems to be our one good card now, so we must try to play him—if it is possible."

Something in his voice, as he said the last words, seemed to catch Mr. Perry's attention.

"If it is possible? Have you any reason to think he also is concerned in this—shall we say kidnapping, exploit?"

"At first," said Ridley, "I wondered if the man in the fur coat could be Essington, but if Sir Joshua is to be believed, that at least can't be the case. In my letter to him

I dropped a hint—quite politely—that I thought of referring to Mr. Mandell-Essington also. Here are the words Sir Joshua used in his answer." He took a letter from his pocket, and read aloud, " 'With reference to your suggestion of consulting Mr. Mandell-Essington, I regret to say that Mr. Essington has had a very severe nervous breakdown, and will not be in a condition to deal with any matters of business for some considerable time to come. As he is living under medical care, it will be useless for you to attempt to enter into any correspondence with him, and, of course, quite impossible to see him. In consequence, I am Miss Staynes' only acting guardian; though I may add that if Mr. Essington were in his usual mental health, I am quite certain his views would be mine.' "

" That is awkward," commented Mr. Perry.

" If it is true," said Ridley. " But I don't believe a single word Sir Joshua tells me until I have discovered for myself whether he is telling the truth or not."

Mr. Perry shook his head.

" It would be a very dangerous statement to make about a man—to say he was suffering from mental trouble and under medical restraint, unless it were true. It would amount to a serious libel."

" Oh, I don't say that it isn't probably

partially true. But what I won't believe unless I can prove it, is that Essington is so bad that he can't help me, anyhow, to find Beatrix."

"Well," admitted the lawyer, "it is certainly worth while making inquiries. Do you know where Mr. Essington is living, or being kept, at present?"

"I don't," said Ridley, "and that is one matter in which I hoped you might help me. How can one find out?"

Mr. Perry looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he said:

"While we have been talking it has come back to me where I heard of Mr. Mandell-Essington before. A relative of his is a client of ours, and I make no doubt I could discover his address in that way if I felt justified in asking it as a favour."

"Please do!" exclaimed the two young men simultaneously.

"What steps do you mean to take if I get you this information?" asked the lawyer cautiously.

"I mean to go down and see Mr. Essington, if I can possibly get at him," said Ridley.

"And you'll take me with you this time?" cried Toothill. "My dear old fellow, I'm simply burstin' to *do* something!" He

turned to Mr. Perry and explained ingenuously, " I'm no great shakes at thinkin' and plannin', etcetera, etcetera ; but I am really quite useful at *doin'* things. That's my lay, the active line. And if it comes to breakin' into this place where Essington is being kept, and fetching the fellow out, well, two will manage the job better than one."

" My dear sir ! " exclaimed the lawyer. " The place is quite likely a private asylum of some kind, and I certainly shall do nothing to assist you in any such performance. You would render yourselves liable to very heavy penalties indeed, and so should I, if I gave you any countenance in the matter."

Philip Ridley smiled, and his face became very engaging when a smile lit it.

" I shall only take you, Charles," he said, " if you guarantee to do exactly what you are told."

" I shall, I promise you ! " said Charles, " I swear to do exactly what I'm told ! "

Ridley turned to Mr. Perry.

" I can guarantee, Mr. Perry, that we shan't break in anywhere. I shall try to *get* in, of course ; but that is different. And if Mr. Essington is really under restraint, I promise you we shall make no attempt to get him out of it."

For a few moments the lawyer considered the matter.

"Before I do anything at all, Mr. Ridley," he said at length, "I must see that you clearly understand and realise the whole situation, as far as it is known at present. In the first place, Miss Staynes is a ward under age, in her guardian's charge—at least, that must be the assumption on the facts so far as we have them. You have no legal right to interfere with any arrangements he may have made, even though you consider yourself badly treated."

"Surely I can try to see her?"

"You can try, by lawful means, of course. But so long as she remains silent and makes no complaint, your position is unfortunately weak."

"Weak!" exclaimed Charles. "What, after that little blighter in the bowler sent us to the wrong station—deliberately?"

"I am telling you your position in the eye of the law. Of course, if any constraint were being put upon Miss Staynes, or any advantage was being taken of her in any way, the question becomes entirely different. But I can hardly imagine Sir Joshua Horsham doing anything of that kind. What motive could he possibly have? He can't want to secure her money

for his own ends. He is an extremely wealthy man."

"I am wondering all the time," said Ridley, in a low voice.

"But there is another aspect of the matter that must be remembered," continued Mr. Perry. "If you were to find her and run away with her without her guardian's consent, you would be robbing her of her money yourself."

"I know. I've thought of that. *I* don't want all that money; but to rob her . . . !"

"Precisely. You must *not* do that. In short, you must either wait till she is twenty-five——"

"Seven years!" cried Ridley. "Oh, we simply can't!"

"Or else you must get her guardians on your side. And if you are really judicious and careful, there can be no harm in trying to see Mr. Mandell-Essington; or at all events, in discovering whether Sir Joshua's statement is literally accurate, or whether he may not be capable, either now or very shortly, of taking some step to clear this business up."

"You agree, then, that he is our best card?"

"Your only card in the meantime; if, as you say, it is possible to play him."

"We'll have a rare good try!" said

Ridley. "And you will get me his address, Mr. Perry?"

"Yes, I think I can guarantee to let you have it to-night."

"Then to-morrow," exclaimed Charles, "we may actually be *doin'* something!"

"Do it very carefully," advised the lawyer.

CHAPTER III

UNDER RESTRAINT

ON a fine September afternoon Dr. Jenkinson opened the door in the wall at the foot of his private garden and passed through into the grounds of that select mental sanatorium known as The Retreat. Twenty-four ladies and gentlemen (the number was never exceeded), each with their private attendant, and all suffering from the pace at which we lived at the end of the nineteenth century, and more especially from the pace at which their own particular lives had been whirling, sought, and found, repose in The Retreat, and paid Dr. Jenkinson a very handsome return for the privilege. Or perhaps it would be more generally accurate to say that their relatives sought repose by placing the twenty-four in seclusion, and frequently even paid themselves to secure this respite.

"It will be a very happy home for him (or her), I understand," the relatives were in the habit of saying.

"As happy as I can make it," said Dr. Jenkinson, who was a cautious man.

On this particular afternoon, hardly had he replaced the patent key in his pocket and set off down the path that led from his private demesne, when he became aware of two gentlemen approaching him, with a third figure some thirty paces behind. One of these gentlemen was youthful, clean, and pleasant-looking, and with a certain professional briskness in his manner. The experienced in such matters could have guessed at once that he was Dr. Jenkinson's assistant. The figure behind also clearly belonged to the staff of the establishment, though on a lower plane than the young doctor. His upright figure, broad shoulders, and quietly watchful air marked him at a glance as one of the twenty-four's private attendants.

The gentleman who walked beside the assistant was, however, of quite a different appearance. He was in the young thirties, tall and fair, and with an indefinable air of distinction stamped both upon his agreeable features and his graceful figure. He wore a long, very fashionably-cut overcoat, of a yellow hue with a velvet collar to match, and on his head, rather to one side of it, a slouch felt hat, which he raised very politely as they met the doctor.

"Doctor," he said, "we have come to greet you with a very gratifying bit of news. Thanks to your truly marvellous treatment, I am practically cured!"

High though the compliment was, and gracefully as it was paid, Dr. Jenkinson eyed, with what seemed a somewhat dubious expression, both the upraised hat and the sweeping bow that accompanied it.

"I am very glad to hear it, Mr. Essington," said he, "and very soon, I hope, you will be leaving The Retreat."

"I should prefer," said Mr. Essington, "to think that you regretted that impending calamity. I shall miss you all, doctor, extremely; especially the fellow who thinks he's the equator, and tries to encircle all the ladies. In fact, I am taking that tip away with me. However, in the meantime, I have only arranged a little trip up to town for the day with our friend Walters, just to get my sane legs and buy a button-hole or so. I shall be back at night, I assure you; probably with half a dozen new stories."

He turned to the young doctor and said in the most engaging and persuasive way:

"Tell the doctor our programme, Walters. Explain that we shall toss whether I shall look after you, or you after me, and that

in either case the looking will be damned well done."

Dr. Walters laughed, and said:

"The fact is, sir, when I went into my room just now I found Mr. Essington waiting for me, and nothing would satisfy him but coming to see you and ask whether he could run up to town with me to-morrow. I mentioned to him that I was going up for the day, and he seems extraordinarily set upon it."

"Extraordinarily?" exclaimed Mr. Essington. "My dear fellow, you have never been deprived of your liberty for ten years——"

"Ten years?" interrupted Dr. Jenkinson. "Oh, come——"

"It seems like ten years to me," said Mr. Essington with a sigh, "and probably seems more to my tradesmen and best girls. The really extraordinary thing would be to find a fellow in this Retreat who doesn't long for a day's liberty."

Dr. Jenkinson began to shake his head, kindly but firmly.

"Not quite yet, Mr. Essington," he began.

"One moment!" interrupted that gentleman hurriedly. "Don't commit yourself to any statement you would be sorry for afterwards. I should be really infernally grieved to think of your doing that, doctor. If you

let me out with Walters to-morrow, I give you the solemnest guarantee ever given to a medical man that I shall only consume one bottle, speak for one minute to one pretty girl—Walters watching me with his watch in his hand—and order one pair of trousers from one tailor—I can even make it one trouser if you insist. And I guarantee to come back at night. Whereas, supposing that by some unlucky chance Jakes there" (he indicated the attendant in the background) "were to give me a leg up over the wall, and I happened to fall safely on the other side, I'd be gone without any guarantees whatever. A dozen bottles, a dozen girls—my dear sir, there's no knowing what excesses you might not find yourself responsible for! Come now, doctor, be a sportsman!"

No one but a hardened specialist could have resisted this eloquent appeal, and the amiable and pleading manner in which it was delivered. But Dr. Jenkinson merely shook his head once more.

"Not quite yet, Mr. Essington," he repeated quietly, but with an air of finality that caused the disappointed gentleman to heave his shoulders in a dramatic sigh.

"I should have thought," he said, "that one good turn deserved another. I have been supplying you with a twenty-fourth

"It is very difficult to say exactly what is in Mr. Mandell-Essington's head," said Dr. Jenkinson, "and as to whether he is quite as transparently frank as you think—H'm!"

A little later Dr. Walters was back in his room, and with the anticipation of the morrow in London in his mind, he turned to his time-table to look up the trains. It usually stood among a small row of reference books on his desk, but it certainly was not there now. He hunted through the papers on his table, in the bookcase, everywhere; but there was not a sign of the time-table.

"Who can possibly have taken it?" he said to himself; "nobody has any business to have been in this room." And then he suddenly remembered that one person had been there. Mr. Essington, in fact, had been waiting for him before they set out to see Dr. Jenkinson. His chief's last words returned sharply to his mind.

"Can the man actually have any idea of that kind?" he asked himself. "We must keep our weather eye open, anyhow."

CHAPTER IV

The Other Guardian

" Wadbury and Bridminton seem to be the only two possible stations," said Mr. Essington to himself.

He folded up the map and replaced the time-table in his pocket, first throwing a wary glance at a figure pacing the turf about a hundred yards away.

" Trains are all very well," the soliloquy concluded, " but that's a particularly damned-looking kind of wall, and I believe Jakes is quite a bit of a sprinter."

He was sitting on a rustic bench in a corner of the park; a grove of high trees all about him; glimpses of his perambulating guardian on the one side, and of a nine-foot brick wall on the other. The afternoon was warm and fine, and he had just folded his arms and closed his eyes with an air of indolent resignation, when he was roused by the sharp sound of a footfall on crackling twigs. Turning on his seat, he beheld an

"You are one of Miss Beatrix Staynes' guardians, I believe?"

"Miss Beatrix Staynes?" replied the gentleman on the bench. "Ah, yes! I believe her late father did indeed pay that very remarkable compliment to the solidity of my character and austerity of my morals. I have never before been entrusted with what I believe they term 'a bit of fluff,' but I look forward greatly to chaperoning Miss Beatrix. Pretty girl, I hope?"

"Extremely," said the young man, still looking a trifle embarrassed, "but what I have really come to see you about, Mr. Essington, is her disappearance."

"Disappearance?" said Mr. Essington, raising his brows. "Begun already, has she? Ah, well, she will turn up again—and probably at the most awkward moment possible. At least, my own happy reminiscences have generally shown a damnable tendency to boomerang just when one hoped they had forgotten."

"I am afraid I haven't made myself perfectly clear," said Philip. "The facts are I met Miss Staynes in Switzerland, and—well, we became engaged."

"I congratulate you!" smiled Mr. Essington. "Pardon the interruption, but I believe it is quite the correct thing to say.

And thereupon she disappeared? Do you attribute it to sheer carelessness, or a tendency to betrothal bigamy?"

"Oh, but she didn't disappear immediately!" cried the young man (who seemed a little doubtful in what spirit he should treat these comments), and thereupon he narrated his adventures of the past few days, in a brief, straightforward fashion, yet with sufficient particularity to place Miss Staynes' guardian in possession of the essential facts.

Mr. Essington listened with great attention and appeared to be vastly interested, yet his first comment struck Philip as missing the seriousness of the situation.

"It reminds me," said he, "of a curious adventure of an old friend of my own. A charming girl absolutely vanished, taking his dress boots and his best set of shirt studs——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Essington," the young lover interrupted, politely yet firmly, "but time is rather pressing and I want your assistance, if—if you can give me any."

"My dear fellow, you shall certainly have it," said Mr. Essington cordially. "The first thing for us to do is to get on the track of my old friend Horsham—he's not the same old friend who lost the dress boots,

by the way. Old Horsham has no doubt married the girl already. Still, if we can recover the lady and square the registrar——"

Again the unfortunate lover began to exhibit symptoms of some impatience.

"You agree with me then, that Sir Joshua is at the bottom of it?" said he.

"It is only a theory," said Mr. Essington easily. "But we clearly must chase somebody and old Horsham can't run very fast at his age, so we are more likely to catch him than anybody else. If he has the girl, well, we've got her too. If he hasn't, it can't be helped."

This suggestion did not seem to rouse any great enthusiasm. Philip, in fact, looked for an instant somewhat critically at the lady's guardian and then frowned into space. In a moment he asked:

"Have you any idea who the man in the fur coat can be?"

"His name," said Mr. Essington, "is Legion. The number of fellows with fur coats nowadays is quite extraordinary."

At this juncture, his visitor's perplexity, nay indeed his distress, evidently arrested his attention. With a very charming and kindly smile he addressed him in a slightly more serious vein.

"My dear Ridley, I am really devilish sorry I can't tell you more precisely under which thimble the pea has strayed. And when I talked of joining in the pursuit of the amorous Joshua, I spoke, I'm afraid, a little metaphorically. As Dr. Jenkinson has no doubt informed you, I am at present so superior to my fellows both mentally and morally that they have secluded me in this Eden until I become more commonplace again. If you can persuade the good doctor to let me accompany you into the forbidden outer world" (here Mr. Essington sighed in a decidedly moving manner) "we'd have a devil of a time together! I mean of course after we had caught the lady," he added (for he seemed to have become aware that the excellent impression produced by the first part of this speech was a little marred by its conclusion). "In fact, when I mentioned a devil of a time I was thinking of the wedding. Do you care to discuss the matter with Jenkinson?"

"Unfortunately," confessed Philip, "I don't know him. The fact is I came down here with a friend, and we decided we would make surer of seeing you if we managed it without consulting Dr. Jenkinson."

Mr. Essington's eyes had a sudden gleam in them and he sat up sharply on his bench.

"This is much more promising!" he exclaimed. "I must apologise for assuming you to be as orthodox as you look. How did you manage to get in?"

"I simply told them at the lodge I wanted to see the doctor, and then when I got inside I chose a likely looking fellow and asked where you were."

"So easy to get in," sighed Mr. Essington, "but so dashed difficult to get out! However," he resumed in a more cheerful tone, and with a flattering suggestion of confidence in his new friend's abilities, "you have no doubt thought of some sound but simple method; something on the lines of your own excellent little bit of bluff, for instance?"

Philip opened his steady grey eyes very wide for an instant, and then with an expression at once apologetic and firm, he said:

"I am very sorry, Mr. Essington, that I can't possibly do—er—that. In fact, I was only given your address on the understanding that I should do nothing—er——"

He hesitated, seeking for the tactful word, and Mr. Essington, who had been studying him with a connoisseur's eye, finished his sentence for him.

"I know!" said he with virtuous emphasis. "Nothing *wrong*. My dear fellow, I am really infinitely relieved to know that taking

me away with you was not part of your programme. I have already consulted Dr. Jenkinson on the subject, and he has quite convinced me that I am better—and happier—where I am. Please dismiss the idea entirely from your mind, Ridley!"

"Oh, but it really wasn't in it," Ridley assured him with much sincerity.

"I am glad of that! And now let us consider the best alternative——"

"Alternative to what?" inquired Philip.

"I meant to say the best means of recovering my dear ward." Mr. Essington gazed thoughtfully into space and there could be no doubt he was giving this subject very earnest attention. "You say you brought a friend with you," he resumed in a moment. "Did you leave him at the lodge?"

"No," said Philip, "as a matter of fact we came from the station by a lane just over that wall, and I left him to wait for me there—I ought perhaps to explain," he added with a smile, "that he, too, is a friend of Beatrix, and so keen to do something to help that I couldn't very well refuse to let him come down here with me. But I assure you he is absolutely trustworthy and discreet—that's to say he is certainly trustworthy and I shall see that he isn't indiscreet."

During this explanation a gleam once more

lit Mr. Essington's eye for the fraction of a second and then was gone, leaving behind an impression of even greater sympathy and attention than before.

"A fellow that can be trusted to obey instructions implicitly?" said he.

"Oh, yes, I assure you."

"Excellent!" said Mr. Essington, and he seemed to say it with great sincerity too. "I can assure you, my dear Ridley, that I thoroughly approve of your conduct of this affair. And I should like to add that as Beatrix's guardian, I also thoroughly approve of her choice. This time I congratulate *her!*"

And he held out his hand, which the young man took with a flush of pleasure.

"I'm awfully glad you are on our side, Mr. Essington!" he said gratefully.

"Entirely on your side!" Mr. Essington assured him. "I am only sorry I can do so little at the moment. By Jove, though, I know what I can do! I can get you some very useful addresses, if you don't mind waiting here for a few minutes while I go up to the house for my pocket book. I ask you to wait here," he explained with a confidential smile, "because you see you came in without Jenkinson's knowledge. I'm not blaming you, my dear fellow, not a bit! Only it is

just as well you should keep out of the way. You quite understand?"

"Perfectly," said Philip warmly. "It is extremely kind of you to help me."

By this time his fiancée's guardian had exhibited such a sensible, kind, and even flattering interest that his confidence in Mr. Essington was entirely restored, and even that gentleman's next request served rather to awake compassion than disquiet.

"There is just one trifling favour I am afraid I must ask of you," continued the benevolent guardian. "You see that fellow pacing backwards and forwards over there and occasionally looking at us as though he were wondering who the devil you were? That's a tiresome lunatic who has got a most extraordinary delusion about my overcoat. If I pass him wearing this yellow coat there will certainly be a disagreeable scene. Do you mind changing overcoats while I am away?"

Not having previously visited such an institution, Philip, though a trifle surprised at the lack of supervision implied by this incident, felt that he could hardly refuse Beatrix's guardian this small favour. Mr. Essington, now arrayed in a dark blue melton coat, added one last injunction.

"Remain sitting on this bench with your

back turned towards the man. He won't come near you so long as you sit quite still. And in any case he isn't in the least dangerous. Have no fear of that! He's only one of those noisy rude kind of fellows. Au revoir! I won't be five minutes."

The duplicate Mr. Essington had been sitting patiently in the long yellow coat for what seemed very much more like ten than five minutes, meditating on the difference between the life of these institutions in fiction and actual fact, and glancing occasionally over his shoulder at the perambulating lunatic with the overcoat delusion, when he was a little perturbed to see this individual stop short suddenly and stare very hard in his direction. A moment later the man was approaching him with ever quickening stride, and the nearer he approached the more sincerely did Philip hope that his friend's description of him as non-dangerous was correct, for he was a strapping customer. And then in a voice that suggested no unreasonable prejudice against yellow overcoats, but certainly indicated considerable concern, the man inquired:

"Where is Mr. Essington, sir?"

"Mr. Essington?" replied Philip stoutly. "Why do you want to know?"

"I am his attendant," said the man.

For a moment Philip stared at the man in silence, and then he uttered one word, but uttered that very sincerely:

"Damn!"

"Where is he?" the man repeated.

"Come on!" said Philip, "I don't know where the devil he is, but we've got to catch him!"

CHAPTER V

A False Scent

In a shady lane bounded by the brick wall, Mr. Charles Toothill had paced backwards and forwards for well-nigh an hour; calmly at first, but with ever increasing impatience as the time went by.

"Dash it!" he said to himself, "Philip is *doin'* something. Oh, the devil! If I could only get something to *do*!" And then with as much sentiment as his countenance could achieve, he murmured, "For *her* sake!"

As his impatience waxed, his stride had quickened, but all at once it ceased as he pulled himself up sharply and listened. A curious sound suggestive both of scraping and struggling was coming from the other side of the wall, and the practical eye of the man of action noted that at the point where it came from, a considerable growth of ivy appeared above the top. The next moment, a couple of hands, a head, and then a whole gentleman rose above the ivy, and for an

instant the gentleman's eyes seemed to be searching the lane, and then to fall upon Mr. Toothill. And thereupon, without a second's further delay, the gentleman let himself down till only his hands gripped the coping stone, and dropped into the lane.

For one bewildered moment, Charles wondered what strange metamorphosis had overtaken his friend, for the blue overcoat was surely Philip's. Then he perceived that the coat must merely be a singular coincidence, and that the gentleman himself was a stranger, tall, and of a distinguished appearance. This stranger strode quickly towards him, beginning to smile in a very charming manner as he approached; and when he spoke, his greeting was courtesy itself.

"Mr. Ridley's friend, I presume?" said he. "For the moment your name, sir, escapes me. . . ."

"Toothill," said Charles in his most agreeable voice.

"Ah, of course, Toothill! A name I ought never to have forgotten! My own is Essington."

"Oh, by Jove, really!" exclaimed Charles. "Then you've got out—er—I mean come out after all? Just what I advised! But I thought Philip was dead set against it."

"A little at first," Mr. Essington admitted,

"but on talking it over he very soon came to see the matter as you had advised."

"And where is Philip himself?" asked Charles anxiously.

"Covering my tracks like the good fellow he is," said Mr. Essington, in a tone of such warm appreciation that Charles was more charmed with him than ever. "In the meantime he has told me I could place myself safely in your hands, Toothill."

"My dear old bird," cried the gratified Toothill, "I say, I beg your pardon; afraid my keenness rather carried me away. My dear Mr. Essington, I mean, I assure you I've simply been longin' to lend a hand! I am—er—a friend of *hers*, you know."

The ardent voice in which he made this confession seemed to please the lady's guardian exceedingly.

"Then I know we can count on you," said he, "and the first thing is to get a little further away from that wall. This way, I think."

They plunged into the wood that bordered the other side of the lane, and it was apparent that Mr. Essington had been studying his map attentively, for he led the way at top speed, and without hesitation, till in a few minutes they caught a glimpse of a broad highway beyond the trees.

"The road from Wadbury to Bridminton!" said he, and paused at last.

"What are you goin' to do?" asked Charles.

His distinguished-looking friend took him by the arm in a very flattering and friendly way, and his manner became more affectionately kind than ever.

"In the first place, Toothill—and for *her* sake entirely, old chap!—Ridley wished me to ask you for a trifling favour."

"Rather! What is it?" said Charles stoutly. "You know I promised to do anything he wanted me to do."

"Splendid fellow!" exclaimed Mr. Essington in a voice that seemed to indicate great pleasure in this discovery. "That makes a somewhat delicate favour infinitely easier to ask. He wishes you, Toothill, to lend me a five pound note . . . or two!" he added hastily as he saw Charles's eye actually brighten. "Or even three if you can spare them. In fact as much as you can conveniently let me have. I stupidly forgot to cash a cheque before I left."

"I'll lend you everything I've got," said Charles, "only too delighted, in fact, to have the chance."

The celerity with which Mr. Essington, once he had got to business, transferred the

contents of Mr. Toothill's purse into his own pocket, impressed Charles very favourably. A man of action as well as of breeding, he evidently was.

Having pocketed two five pound notes, four sovereigns, and some mixed change, Miss Staynes' guardian positively insisted on his new friend keeping the rest.

"We counted on your doing another small favour," he explained, "and you may need a little ready money."

"I'm on for anything," said Charles warmly, "keen as mustard! What's the job?"

"Ridley wishes you," said Mr. Essington, impressively, "to lay a false scent!"

"A false scent?" said Charles a little vaguely. "If you tell me how to lay it, rather! But what do you mean by a false scent?"

"The idea," replied Mr. Essington still more impressively, "is this. In the first place we change overcoats, Ridley and I did it before," he added in an encouraging voice as he observed the look of affectionate regret which Mr. Toothill involuntarily cast down at his own fashionably cut article, of a pale, pea-green colour with a loose back. "And, of course, we shall return yours to you the very moment we meet again."

"Yes, but where's he to write? Where am I to go?"

"Say Liverpool—somewhere in the docks," suggested Mr. Essington.

"Oh, dash it, I didn't mean to go as far as that!" protested Charles. "Look here, tell him I'm going to lie low with my aunt, Lady Beaton. He knows her address."

"Right oh, I'll tell him! But my dear fellow, you've five miles to run. . . ."

"Good-bye!" cried Charles, over his shoulder as he made for the road. "And when you do find her. . . ."

"I know—your love!"

The distinguished looking gentleman waved a kindly farewell and then took out his watch and his time-table. A few minutes later he was hastening in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER VI

The Doctor's Visitor

Upon this same afternoon, very shortly after Ridley had passed through the gates of Dr. Jenkinson's grounds, another gentleman appeared at the Lodge and also made inquiry for the doctor. This second gentleman, however, actually proceeded up to the house, and paid a genuine call. The doctor had not previously made his acquaintance, nor did the name of "Mr. Mason," when it was sent in to him, suggest any association of ideas; but the moment the visitor entered his room, Mr. Mason was at some pains to make it quite clear that he was a person of fashion and position in life.

"I believe," said he, "that you are acquainted with my uncle, Sir Joshua Horsham?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," said the doctor affably. "I have the pleasure of Sir Joshua's acquaintance, and the name of Horsham and Stukley, is, of course, very well known."

"I also am a partner in that firm," Mr. Mason mentioned in an incidental sort of way, and Dr. Jenkinson looked with increased respect at his caller. He was a man, he judged, about five and thirty, tall, clean-shaved, with pronounced but well-cut and handsome features. His jet black hair was distinctly wavy, but barbered to a miracle of glossiness, and his manner was an impressive blend of confidence in himself, and condescension towards others less favourably situated in society. The doctor felt that his distinguished looking visitor had placed him immediately in this last category, but being a modest and unassuming little man, he accepted the classification as quite natural and very proper.

"I have called upon you," the visitor proceeded, "with reference to my old friend, Mr. Mandell-Essington."

"Ah, quite so!" said the doctor. "I was of course aware that Sir Joshua was much interested in Mr. Mandell-Essington. They are relations, in fact, are they not?"

"Connections. Francis and I are very old friends indeed. We were both at school and at the 'Varsity together, and as I happen to be a year or two older, he always regarded me as a kind of elder brother. Since then we have shot together, hunted together, and

so on ; in short, we have kept up our intimacy down to this day, and I think Francis would probably tell you that I am his oldest friend."

" Indeed ? " said the doctor with interest. " Well, Mr. Mason, in that case you will be glad to hear that Mr. Essington is making a satisfactory recovery from this unfortunate but luckily very brief attack. He is quite on the mend now, I assure you."

" I am very glad indeed to hear it," said Mr. Mason, yet with a note of gravity that a little surprised the doctor.

" Oh, but I assure you I am not at all exaggerating his progress."

Still Mr. Mason failed to show those signs of pleasure which Dr. Jenkinson expected.

" I hope you are right, doctor, I hope so, indeed," said he, still in the same grave tone. " Naturally no one can be more delighted than myself to think of poor Francis being himself again. At the same time I know his constitution and temperament, and so on, probably better than anyone else, and I feel perfectly certain—absolutely assured—Dr. Jenkinson " (here his voice became very serious and impressive indeed) " that it would be the gravest mistake to let him leave your charge for some time to come. I want to impress that on you very strongly, Dr. Jenkinson."

"I have only to-day put my foot down on a suggestion that he should be allowed a day in London on probation," said the doctor.

Mr. Mason seemed curiously disturbed by this news.

"At whose instigation was this suggestion made?" he demanded.

"Oh, it was entirely his own idea."

Mr. Mason threw him a curious look.

"I wonder!" said he, and then added emphatically, "He must not be allowed anywhere!"

"I shall use my judgment, of course," said the doctor mildly.

"I am adding the advantage of mine also," answered his visitor in a tone that made it difficult to find a reply.

Mr. Mason gave the doctor a moment to let this sink in, and then resumed, speaking now in an even graver voice:

"It has come to my knowledge, Dr. Jenkinson, that certain unscrupulous persons may very probably attempt to get at Francis and trouble him on a matter of family business, and I need hardly point out how that would retard his recovery. This must be prevented at all costs."

"I can assure you, Mr. Mason," said the doctor, "that I certainly should not allow anything of that sort if I could help it, and

now that I am warned, I certainly shall prevent it. At the same time," he added, with a smile, "Mr. Mandell-Essington is scarcely likely to be much affected even if he were approached on business matters. I imagine that he has at no time taken life with what I may perhaps be allowed to call undue seriousness, and at present his buoyancy is even more marked than usual."

Mr. Mason shook his head.

"It mustn't be risked, doctor! And besides, I fear there may even be the danger of an attempt to get him out. I have no specific information, but I want to guard against everything—even against off chances." He seemed to see in the doctor's eye an indication of some surprise at this extreme solicitude, for he added with emphasis. "I speak as his oldest friend, remember, a friend who above all others is attached to poor Francis and concerned for his welfare."

"I shall take every precaution," replied Dr. Jenkinson. "You can rest assured——"

But the assurance got no further, for at that moment the door was flung hurriedly open, and Dr. Walters entered. His usually brisk and cheerful manner was notably altered.

"Mandell-Essington has escaped!" he cried.

"What!" thundered the visitor, and then

with a darkened face and a manner that had lost all its suavity and condescension, he cried. "This is a put up job! Who let him out?"

Dr. Jenkinson drew himself up, and his manner also changed.

"This is my assistant, Dr. Walters," he said stiffly. "He will tell you what there is to be known. I myself am as ignorant of the facts as you are. How did it happen, Walters?"

"We don't exactly know yet. The only person who actually saw him start is a fellow who appears to have got into the grounds somehow or other, and to have been talking to him."

"Do you mean he helped him to escape?" cried Mr. Mason.

"I hardly think so, because it was he who came and reported the escape. I really don't know what to make of the business."

"Where is this fellow?" demanded Dr. Jenkinson.

"Out in the hall, sir."

"Let us see him at once!" said Mr. Mason.

In the hall they found a gentlemanly and good-looking young man, with a light yellow overcoat carried across his arm.

"Are you the gentleman who saw Mr. Essington escape?" asked the doctor.

"I was with him just before he went away," said the young man. "By the way, here is his overcoat. I may mention that he has escaped in mine, and if you recover it I should be very glad to have it back again."

His coolness seemed to disconcert both Mr. Essington's custodian and his friend.

"Do you mean—er—that you——" began the doctor.

"You lent him your coat to escape in?" interrupted Mr. Mason.

"Are you Dr. Jenkinson?" inquired the young man.

"I am not——" began Mr. Mason warmly.

The young man had already turned his shoulder to him.

"You will please see about returning my coat," he said to the doctor.

"May I ask your name?" inquired the doctor.

"Ridley," said the young man.

"Oh," said the doctor, eyeing him dubiously, and a moment later he turned to Mr. Mason, but in the course of that moment his first visitor had turned away abruptly, and was already on his way back to the doctor's room.

After his first look of surprise, Dr. Jenkinson seemed not displeased to be quit of his peremptory visitor. He put several questions to Ridley, and extracted a brief account

of Mr. Essington's method of departure. As to the precise reason why Mr. Ridley should have entered the grounds and interviewed Mr. Essington without permission, the young man assured him that it was merely a matter of private business, that he had consulted a lawyer before taking the step, and that so far from abetting the fugitive in his escape, nothing more disastrously inconvenient to himself could possibly have happened. Indeed, Ridley was evidently so sincerely troubled by Mr. Essington's flight, and so anxious to assist in his recapture that the doctor contented himself with looking exceedingly grave, taking down his address, and finally letting him go with a warning against entering such institutions again, and accepting the statements of their inhabitants.

"If I didn't happen to know so much about Mr. Essington," said he, "I should feel some not unnatural suspicion of your story, Mr. Ridley, but I already suspected him of wanting to escape, and the manner in which he deceived you, is—well, in fact it is too thoroughly characteristic of the gentleman to be invented by anybody else."

"You will surely recapture him very soon, won't you?" said Philip, as they parted.

"Oh, that is probably merely a matter of

hours," replied the doctor confidently. "There are only two stations in this whole neighbourhood, and no trains from either of them that he could possibly catch before evening. By that time I shall have men watching them both, and he will be nailed for a certainty if he tries to get away by train. If he simply wanders through the country, well, we shall get him in the course of to-morrow at latest. It is not as though we were near a big town. He cannot possibly remain at large for more than a very short time."

Dr. Jenkinson had already turned back towards his room when a very important question occurred to him.

"Oh, by the way," said he, "what was the colour and description of your coat that Essington is now wearing?"

"Blue Melton with a velvet collar."

"Ah!" exclaimed the doctor. "Lucky I remembered to ask you that! We now know how he is dressed, Walters."

The young doctor led Ridley to the front door. He threw it open and they perceived a cab waiting outside. Philip paused on the threshold. He seemed to be struck by something in the hall.

"Do you happen to know who that was with Dr. Jenkinson?" he asked.

Walters shrugged his shoulders. "Some one who has apparently just bought the whole place," he replied ironically.

"I suppose he came in that cab?"

"Presumably."

"Is this his coat?"

Walters glanced at the handsome fur coat lying across a chair, and answered in the same vein.

"Must be. It's too magnificent for any of us ordinary people."

"Could you possibly find out his name?" asked Philip.

"I happened to hear it was Mason. Know anything about him?"

"I am not quite sure," said Philip. "It's such a beastly common name—not very easy to trace, I'm afraid."

As he walked down the drive, his thoughts took another turn.

"Poor old Charles must be getting a bit impatient!" he said to himself. "I wonder how he is putting in the time?"

* * * * *

Towards eight o'clock in the evening Dr. Walters came in hurriedly to see his chief with a piece of very startling news.

"The beggar has actually got away by train, sir!" he announced. "I've just heard

that a man in a blue Melton coat was seen at various places on the road running like a stag towards Bridminton. He dashed into the station just as the 5.52 train was moving out, knocked down a porter who tried to stop him, and leapt into the end carriage without a ticket! And where he has got to by now, the Lord only knows!"

Dr. Jenkinson was usually a gentleman of precise and restrained language, but this news cut through the crust.

"This is absolutely damnable!" he exclaimed.

The two doctors looked at one another in silence for a few moments, and then Walters ventured to remark,

"I had no idea Essington was fond enough of exercise for such a performance!"

"No more had I!" agreed his chief. "He is really a very unusual case."

CHAPTER VII

THE DIRECTOR

FOR some time before the down express was due, a couple of stalwart figures had been sitting, the one in the waiting-room and the other in the ticket office of Wadbury station. As neither of them made any great secret of his business there, and as, in fact, the man in the ticket office had to explain his errand to the station-master in order to obtain admission, their purpose very soon became known to the whole staff, and a pleasing thrill of excitement began to pervade the station. One or two passengers who arrived early heard the news from the porters and passed it on to later arrivals, so that as the time drew near for the signals to fall, the whole platform had been worked up to a state of the highest expectation.

"One of Dr. Jenkinson's lunatics run away!" ran the rumour. "He's expected to try and escape by this train, but them two big fellows are going to catch him! No fears of his getting away from *them*!"

Dusk had begun to draw in soon after the big fellows' arrival, and by the time the express was signalled it had grown quite dark. This circumstance added considerably to the excitement, for, in the shadows, who among one's fellow passengers might not be the dangerous runaway? And even the lamps gave little enough illumination to reassure the nervous. On the other hand, a tale, very exciting in itself but disappointing so far as Wadbury's particular sensation was concerned, had been brought to the station by a late arrival. It was said that the lunatic had actually been seen escaping in quite the opposite direction. Indeed, it was even said that so far from endeavouring to evade observation, he had careered down the high road towards Bridminton, and if this were really true, he clearly could not have fled towards Wadbury also.

The station-master brought this story at once to the two stalwart figures, and the three could be seen standing together discussing its probability. One or two of the more inquisitive bystanders drew near the group and reported that, on the whole, the chances of a dramatic scene at Wadbury were considered to have diminished greatly. Still, the big fellows were going to wait till

the train had come and gone, so that even yet there were some hopes of a stirring struggle. And then came a faint, steadily swelling rumble through the night, and a bell clanged in the station.

"Here she comes!" said the passengers and looked at each strange figure anxiously. At least a dozen people whispered "I'm certain that man wasn't here two minutes ago!" And at least half a dozen separate individuals were thus stealthily pointed out.

That night there happened to be more passengers than usual at Wadbury station, and for two or three minutes after the express rolled in, Dr. Jenkinson's two big men were kept busy. The departing passengers watched them over their shoulders as they climbed in, and then pushed their heads out through the windows and watched them still. Up and down the train they roved, peering here and there, but there was never a cry or a scuffle or a chase. And then the doors began to close and the platform beside the carriages to clear of people, and it became evident that unless the runaway meant to make a rush for the train at the last moment, there would be no exciting drama after all.

The guard was ready with his flag and lantern, most of the heads had been withdrawn again, and the two big men were

standing with the station-master near the front of the train looking down its length on the off chance of a last moment attempt, but evidently resigned to a blank evening.

"It'll have been him making for Bridminton, right enough," said one of the pair.

"No doubt of that," agreed the station-master.

At that moment a tall gentleman stepped very quietly out of the gloom at the deserted end of the platform and walked up to the engine driver. The three watchers stood a few paces off with their backs to him and hardly a head was now to be seen looking out of the windows. This gentleman was dressed in a pea-green overcoat, carried himself with a very confident and distinguished air, and blew the smoke of a cigar lightly from his lips as he opened the conversation.

"Driver," he inquired in a voice that made the driver instinctively inclined to touch his hat, "have none of the other directors turned up?"

"No, sir," said the engine driver, looking a little surprised.

"What; no sign of the Duke?"

"No, sir," replied the driver, his tone becoming distinctly deferential.

"Ah, well," said the distinguished looking

gentleman, "in that case I must start without them."

And with that he stepped on board the engine and commanded :

"You can start the train now, driver."

At that moment the guard waved his lantern, and to the engine driver it seemed obvious, he afterwards declared, that the train must merely have been waiting for this aristocratic looking director to get on board. As they moved off, the distinguished gentleman remarked in an approving tone :

"Very smart indeed, driver. I never like to be kept waiting," and he added, "You probably didn't hear that the Board of Directors were making a round of inspection, did you ?"

The engine driver confessed his ignorance ; whereupon the director expressed his satisfaction that the visit had been so successfully kept a secret.

"We meant it to be in the nature of a surprise," said he, "the idea being to see how the system was working when it didn't know it was being watched. We are doing it devilish thoroughly, I can assure you."

It struck the engine driver that the Board seemed to be working on somewhat original lines, but at the moment he was too busy engine driving to make any adequate comment.

A few minutes later the director asked suddenly :

" What are those lights ? "

The driver stared for a moment or two.

" That ought to be a place they call ' The Retreat.' "

" What, my friend Dr. Jenkinson's place ? " exclaimed the director.

" Must be," said the driver.

" How pleasant it is to see them from here ! " observed the director.

He seemed very thoughtful for some little time after this, and then he inquired :

" What is the next stop, driver ? "

" Yeddlesby, sir."

" How soon do we get there ? "

" Twenty-six minutes run from Wadbury, sir."

" So soon as that ? " murmured the director. " Damn it ! " And then he asked : " How long is the next run ? "

" Hour and ten minutes, sir."

" Ah ! " said the director, and he seemed more satisfied with this intelligence.

On the whole the engine driver considered that he was coming safely and possibly even creditably through the ordeal of the director's inspection. When he did condescend to address him, that magnate was as affable and polite as any gentleman he had ever

met, and as for a critical inspection either of the engine or anything else, only one single symptom of an inspecting spirit did the director display during the whole course of his ride. This was at Yeddlesby Junction, where he announced his intention of examining the wheels, and leapt down on to the line the instant they had pulled up in the station. On this occasion his inspection was evidently as thorough as he could make it in the time, for it was only at the very last moment that he climbed back. And further evidence of his thoroughness, when he did exert himself, was to be seen in the particular injunction he laid upon the driver and fireman not to report his presence to anyone while they were in the station.

"We wish our visit of inspection to be a complete surprise!" he repeated, very gravely and emphatically indeed.

After that came a long, unbroken run through a dim, rolling country of few lights, save when they roared through some wayside station or little sleepy town, and of many black patches of woodland. They had been going thus for over half an hour when the brakes suddenly jarred and their speed dropped swiftly second by second.

"Hullo, what's up?" inquired the director.

"Signal's against us," said the driver

briefly. "Something on the line, I suppose."

A minute or two more and the express was at a dead stop, the engine panting gently, the red light showing ahead, and all round them a dark wilderness, apparently of sparsely wooded, open heath. The director glanced out into the night, and then addressed the driver courteously.

"Good night, driver," said he. "I get off here. I am having the next train stopped to pick me up. Many thanks for the ride. You have come through your inspection very satisfactorily, I may say."

And with that he stepped off the engine as calmly, the driver subsequently testified, as if he were walking out of a shop.

In the radiance of the engine lights, they saw him for a moment beside the line strolling with an easy and unconcerned air towards the rear of the train, and then the night engulfed him.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said the engine driver.

CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Mason

From end to end of the quiet lane under the high brick wall Philip Ridley paced, and then all its length back again, but there was never a sign of Charles Toothill at the rendezvous. His surprise became concern; he tried whistling and cooeying; for a whole half-hour he waited; and all the while he had the lonely lane to himself.

"This is very unlike Charles!" he said to himself. "I never knew a trustier fellow!"

The only conceivable possibility seemed to be that Charles had misunderstood their plan and gone to meet him at the station. They had arrived at Wadbury, but the only evening train up to London left from Bridminton, and so, at last, Ridley set out to walk the five miles there. Evening was falling when he arrived and the train was not due for more than half an hour; but no Charles was at the station, and in the thickening dusk and with dashed spirits Philip paced

the deserted platform. All the while the faint hope of seeing his friend appear at the eleventh hour was growing fainter, when about ten minutes before the train was due he heard a cab rattle into the station yard. He hastened towards the door into the booking office, and met there, face to face, a gentleman coming through on to the platform. But it was not Charles; it was a tall man in a fur coat.

That the gentleman in the fur coat recognised Ridley was evident, and that he had no desire to resume their acquaintance was equally clear. Mr. Mason turned his shoulder, brushed past, and strode down the platform; and for a minute Philip watched him and hesitated.

Bridminton was a junction, and in a bay another train had been standing for some time, the engine attached and the carriages lit up. Mr. Mason approached the guard of this train, spoke to him for a moment, and then looked back over his shoulder and also seemed to hesitate. And then Philip made up his mind and boldly walked up to him.

"Mr. Mason, I believe?" said he.

The tall man seemed to give the slightest possible start; as though (Philip thought) the discovery that his name was known took

him for an instant a little aback. Then he said frigidly,

"I am."

Under ordinary circumstances, Philip would have been the very last person to accost a stranger considerably older than himself and force his company upon him, but he was a resolute young man, and despite the other's aloofness, stood to his guns.

"We met at Dr. Jenkinson's, I think," he went on.

"Indeed?" said Mr. Mason stonily.

"You are a friend of Mr. Essington's, I presume?"

To this, Mr. Mason made no answer whatever, and Philip continued with commendable politeness.

"I am sorry I had inadvertently any part in his escape."

"So am I," replied Mr. Mason, in a manner that seemed intended to convey the impression he was addressing an erring servant.

Determined to extract every iota of information extractable, Philip kept his temper, and inquired:

"Had you intended to see Mr. Essington yourself?"

Mr. Mason looked at him in silence for a moment, and when he spoke, his tone seemed,

if possible, even more deliberately intended to end the conversation.

"Is that any business of yours?" he asked.

Philip decided to risk a desperate shot.

"I asked," he said, "because I believe I saw you lately with Mr. Essington's ward."

There was no doubt that Mr. Mason was startled this time, though whether it was because the shot went home, or was simply the start of puzzled and bewildered innocence, Philip wished devoutly he could feel certain.

"Really!" said Mr. Mason.

"I mean Miss Beatrix Staynes," added Philip, his eyes looking straight into the other's.

Mr. Mason's did not blink or waver in their stare.

"Who is she?" he inquired.

"I have told you—Mr. Essington's ward. As a friend of his you must have been aware of that."

"I am not acquainted with all Mr. Essington's responsibilities; nor," he added, "do I see why I should discuss Mr. Essington's affairs with you."

So far, Philip was fain to admit he had got remarkably little change out of Mr. Mason; and then a sudden thought leapt into his mind.

"You have nothing to say to me then?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Mason distantly.

"Nothing to ask me?"

"Nothing whatever," said Mr. Mason with a touch of irony.

"Not even why I made my way into 'The Retreat' to interview your friend, Mr. Essington?"

There was no doubt the shot went home. Mr. Mason was manifestly nonplussed, and for a moment said nothing.

"You had probably guessed already?" suggested Philip.

"I am not interested in the matter," replied Mr. Mason, and very deliberately turned his back.

At that moment the porter's bell clanged, and the roar of the in-coming train rose through the night.

"I shall follow Mr. Mason!" said Philip to himself. "He *did* know why I came down, and therefore . . ."

The fur-coated gentleman walked a little distance from him and then stopped and again looked back at him. The train came in and Philip waited till he saw Mr. Mason safely into a carriage near the engine, and then he got into one further down the train. A minute or two passed, and they were off. Glancing out of the window, Philip saw the

station lamps and buildings and one or two figures glide by—and, last of all, Mr. Mason.

He leapt to his feet and his hand was on the handle, but they were past the platform by this time and moving fast. He fell back into the seat and cursed his own unwariness. There returned to his memory now the vision of Mr. Mason speaking to the guard of the other train, and then glancing over his shoulder and hesitating.

"He meant to go by that train all the time!" he thought. "But that at least shows he was afraid I would follow him. He must have been the man in the cab—I'm certain of it now!"

PART II

CHAPTER I

The Rev. Crispin

The Rev. Crispin Pytcher (spelt with a *y*, a very old variety of the name) had been exceedingly carefully brought up. His only surviving parent was a lady of the most exemplary conduct and the most solicitous temperament. Crispin's boyhood was largely spent in goloshes, and he was only allowed to eat one kind of chocolate cream; though since Mrs. Pytcher's heart was as tender as it was anxious, she was easily persuaded to let him consume this speciality by the boxful. His companions were carefully chosen from the quietest girls of their acquaintance, instruction was supplied by the mildest tutor procurable, and until he had turned eighteen and was considered strong enough to handle a tennis racquet, his principal amusement was musical chairs.

Thereafter for three placid years he was one of the five undergraduates who enjoyed the collegiate life of St. Anselm's Hall, Oxon,

and he finally left the University as unsmirched as when he entered, a perfect example of what a mother can accomplish when undisturbed by coarser counsellors.

To see her boy a bishop had long been Mrs. Pytcher's ultimate ambition, but, of course, she realised that he must pass through a chrysalis stage first, so she had him ordained, bought him the necessary outfit, and arranged for his installation in a genteel curacy in the neighbourhood of Kensington High Street. There, for two happy years, the Rev. Crispin intoned such portions of the service as were allotted to him in the most dulcet fashion imaginable, paid a large number of afternoon calls, and took a prominent part in the meetings of a local musical association. Such a strenuous life, however, was bound to tell upon his constitution, and a nasty, feverish cough, lasting for nearly a week, during which his temperature almost touched 100° Fahrenheit, convinced his mother that her boy must seek a change of air without delay.

The Rev. Crispin was already an enthusiastic and skilful ritualist, so that the number of situations in which he could be both happy and useful was limited; but after considerable correspondence with various rectors and vicars in rural situations, it was finally arranged that he should fill a

vacant curacy under the Rev. Boniface Shuttleton-Bowles, rector of the Parish of Gorington, in a certain western county, a thoroughly expert person in this branch of divinity. Mrs. Pytcher herself interviewed Mr. Shuttleton-Bowles, and her accounts of her son were so satisfactory that though that gentleman had no acquaintance with the Rev. Crispin, he readily agreed to install him in the curacy, and accordingly towards the close of a September afternoon Crispin took his seat in a first-class compartment with a neat suit case inscribed in beautifully clear black lettering, "The Rev. Crispin Pytcher," placed carefully in the rack over his head. At the carriage door he received his mother's parting benediction.

"Be sure you keep both the windows closed!" she enjoined on him. "I heard you cough once last night, remember."

"Oh, surely, it was the night before last," he corrected gently.

"Well, perhaps it was, dear, but even that shows it isn't safe to travel with an open window."

The Rev. Crispin looked round the carriage and sniffed once or twice.

"It is a little stuffy," he pronounced, "just a very little at present, but quite possibly it may get more stuffy. Should it

indeed get more stuffy, then surely, perhaps, I had better open the window temporarily. Do you not think so, mother ?"

"I really think you had better not, Crispin," said she affectionately, yet firmly. "I want you to arrive in perfect health!"

Just as the train started a bright inspiration occurred to the Rev. Crispin. Putting his head out of the window, he cried :

"Mothah! It has just occurred to me that if indeed the carriage grows more stuffy, I might open the window into the corridor! That surely would be safah!"

As Mrs. Pytcher was by this time several yards away, and as the distance had considerably increased by the end of her reply, he was unable to hear it distinctly. Being a very conscientious young man, he remained for the next twenty minutes in a condition of some disquietude, wondering what it was lawful for him to do. At last he decided to wait till the carriage actually became more stuffy and decide then; whereupon he opened an illustrated magazine. It was pretty dark by then, but the carriage was well lighted and he passed the following hour or so very placidly.

At Yeddlesby Junction he was able to let down the window for fully five minutes and air the compartment without risk. He even

ventured to put his head out and enjoy a glimpse of the gleaming rails and the deserted platform beyond (for this window was on the off side of the train). He had only meant to keep it out for one single instant, but of a sudden his eye was arrested by a circumstance that struck him as somewhat unusual. Some way up the train, close to the engine in fact, a man was standing on the line in a careless attitude smoking a cigar. Though Crispin was unable to see him very distinctly, he seemed to be a gentleman, and he certainly was engaged on no visible job. And then the whistle blew and the gentleman promptly climbed up, either into a carriage, or—it almost seemed—on to the engine itself. As he climbed, a gleam of light fell upon him and showed a fashionably cut green overcoat; or at least it looked like that so far as the young curate could see.

"What a curious occurrence!" he said to himself. "And how very dangerous! Supposing another train had come suddenly along and run over that man!"

This reflection started a train of thought very painful and disagreeable for one of the curate's sensitive nature. Such dreadful things had happened to so many people in trains—accidents, robberies, and even worse, that Crispin always felt a little nervous when

he started on a railway journey, and, once embarked, endeavoured to keep his mind at rest by looking at pictures or at the scenery. He made this endeavour now and had gradually acquired a calm mood once more when he was startled into a state of the most acute apprehension. The brakes had suddenly been put on and the train was jolting rapidly and uncomfortably to a stop.

"An accident!" he cried to himself, and he spent several very miserable moments waiting for it to begin.

Nothing happened, however, save that the train was now standing still, with no station apparently at hand. Crispin opened the window again and saw that there was indeed only black and empty country in all directions.

"I hope nothing more is going to happen!" he thought.

Nothing, in fact, did happen, and after five or ten minutes the express started on its way again: nothing, that is to say, of an alarming nature, though one small circumstance did for a moment disturb the young curate afresh. Along one end of his compartment ran the corridor, and he fancied he heard one of the doors which opened from this into the outer night being rather gently closed. But as no further sounds followed, and as it seemed highly improbable that anyone would be

getting either into or out of the train at a place where there was no platform, he concluded that his ears must have deceived him.

It was very shortly after they had started again that he was roused from his perusal of the illustrated magazine by a sudden instinct that somebody was watching him. He cast his eyes across the carriage, and there in the corridor a man was actually standing. Whether this person had really been studying him it was now impossible to say, for just as the curate looked up, the man proceeded to open the door and enter the compartment.

For an instant Crispin was conscious of a disagreeable shock of surprise. His nerves had hardly recovered from the effects of the sudden stoppage and the apprehensions it created, and besides, the gentleman who entered was wearing a fashionably cut pea-green overcoat, and this struck him as being somehow or other in the nature of an unpleasant coincidence. And finally, the stranger was smoking a cigar, and Crispin had particularly selected this as being a non-smoking compartment. But his disquiet was very speedily set at rest. Seating himself opposite, the stranger glanced for an instant rather intently at the neatly inscribed suit case overhead, and then smiled

on its owner in a very friendly and engaging way.

"I trust you are having a pleasant journey, sir," he remarked.

Though this was scarcely the usual conversational opening of an entire stranger, so far as Crispin's experience went, yet he was aware how limited that experience was, and the observation itself was so charmingly made that he smiled back gently and murmured:

"Oh, very, thank you; yes, very pleasant indeed."

"An experienced traveller?" inquired the stranger.

"Oh, no, not very; in fact, not at all—ah—widely experienced."

"Ah!" said the stranger, still more pleasantly. "A liver of the idyllic life, I presume?"

"As — ah — idyllic as — ah — possible," sighed the curate, and gave an involuntary sniff. The odour of the stranger's cigar was somewhat overpowering, he found.

That courteous gentleman instantly perceived the sniff and inquired with much solicitude:

"Have I taken too great a liberty in bringing in my cigar? I have not hitherto been sitting in a smoking compartment and I imagined I had come into a carriage where

it was permitted." He glanced at the windows and exclaimed, " Dear me, it isn't a smoker after all! How very careless of me!"

The curate was divided between his distaste for tobacco and his desire to be polite.

" I do not—ah—smoke myself," he said in a gentle voice.

" Your health ? " inquired the stranger.

" Ah—not exactly. The fact is I have promised my mother not to smoke."

For an instant the stranger seemed to be studying him with increased attention, and also apparently with marked satisfaction.

" Shall I open the window ? " he suggested.

" That is unfortunately an alternative which—ah—my mothah is—ah—also averse from," intoned the curate.

This time the good-looking stranger gazed at him very thoughtfully indeed, and then a light, as of sudden inspiration, flashed and was obscured. He had one more careful look at the pale, mild face of the curate, and another at certain embellishments of his watch-chain usually associated with the higher sub-divisions of Anglicanism; and finally shot a third at the black-lettered suit-case overhead. And then he bent forward and his air grew suddenly grave.

" Mr. Crispin Pytcher!" he pronounced in a low, impressive tone.

The young man positively jumped. This stranger knew his name! For the moment the disclosure almost stunned him. As for making any adequate answer, it was quite out of his power. Raising one finger ominously, the stranger spoke again.

"I am afraid I must have a few minutes conversation with you on a very private and serious matter," said he.

CHAPTER II

Escape

"WITH—with me?" stammered the Rev. Crispin.

"In your own interests, Mr. Pytcher. You are not a member of the Anti-Ritual League, I presume?"

"The *Anti*-ritual?" gasped the curate. "Certainly not—oh, most certainly not! Quite the contrary, I assure you!"

"I thought as much!" said the stranger. "And in that case I am relieved to find that you cannot be another of their agents in disguise."

"Their agents—in disguise!" exclaimed the horrified young man.

"There are seven of them in this train! Each is armed with the usual implements—stiletto and spade."

"Stiletto and spade!" cried Crispin. "What—what are they for?"

"The stiletto to do the job, the spade to

conceal the traces," said the stranger, his voice dropping almost to a whisper.

Crispin was aware that the practices of his own particular ecclesiastical circle were regarded by certain misguided persons with extreme and even violent disfavour. He had read, in fact, of a horrid scene—in a church, too, not very long before, but that these persons had actually formed themselves into a criminal association with murderous designs, this indeed was news. It was news so dreadful and so staggering that at first he could scarcely believe it.

"Are—are you quite sure?" he asked, but his quavering voice showed that he had really little hope the stranger might be in error

"Only too sure. Mr. Pytcher. In fact, I may tell you that I myself am at present employed by the Convocation in circumventing—at the risk of my life—the machinations of these miscreants!"

"You are employed yourself?" repeated the curate, opening his mild eyes very wide indeed. "By—ah—did you say the Convocation?"

"After consultation of course with the chbishops and Scotland Yard. You are rave peril, Mr. Pytcher!"

this intimation the young curate ceased

to wonder how such a curious combination should have been employing the gentleman. His face turned even paler than before as he gasped :

"Me ? But—ah—I am only a humble —ah—follower of the movement. Oh, surely —surely——"

The stranger cut him short, peremptorily, yet not unkindly. His air of sympathy, in fact, seemed to the unfortunate young man the only thing left for him to cling to.

"They have been marking you down ever since the train left London ! My dear young man, I am really devil—I mean sincerely sorry for you, but if you remain in this carriage or in that costume, the fate of the sitting rabbit will be yours, Mr. Pytcher ! "

"But—ah—how can I effect a change in my locality, or—ah——"

The stranger interrupted again ; this time with such an air of brisk decision that even Crispin was infected.

"Place yourself in my hands ! " said he. "I am here for the purpose of protecting you ! "

As he spoke he crossed the carriage, pulled down the blinds on the windows looking into the corridor, and then laid his hand firmly yet persuasively on the curate's shoulder.

"Change clothes with me ! " he commanded,

and forthwith unbuttoned the pea-green overcoat.

"But—ah—may you not then suffer if you are seen in my attire?" asked the young man, though he was unbuttoning his own garments even as he spoke.

"Trust me!" replied the stranger confidently. "I have quite a gift for taking care of myself."

He surveyed the curate's figure as he undressed.

"Trousers and sleeves look as if they'd be a trifle short," he observed, "but, on the other hand, a certain type of lady is bound to succumb to the collar alone. I might be worse off."

He seemed to be speaking rather to himself than the curate, and Crispin, whose mind was greatly distracted, paid him little attention. In fact, it was not till he had begun to go over his remarkable escape in retrospect, that certain curious snatches of his rescuer's conversation returned to his memory and puzzled the young man considerably.

"The contents of my own pockets I had better keep," said the stranger.

"Oh, certainly—ah, certainly!" said the curate as he struggled into the stranger's trousers.

"But you really needn't trouble to keep the contents of your pockets. In fact, it would help to obviate suspicion if you didn't."

Even in the extremity of his distress, the Rev. Crispin remembered certain precepts on which Mrs. Pytcher (a careful as well as a fond parent) had laid considerable emphasis.

"Oh—ah—perhaps I had better keep them," he ventured to suggest. "My—ah—well—ah—she would prefer it, I feel almost certain."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"I made the suggestion in your own interests—but just as you like!"

He put on the curate's wideawake, adjusted his braces until the black trousers covered most of his ankle, surveyed himself quickly yet critically in the mirror over the seat, and assumed again his most urgent and unnerving manner.

"Now, Mr. Pytcher, you must leave this train without an instant's delay!" he said, and promptly pulled the communication cord.

"Leave the train!" cried Crispin. "But—ah—really——!"

"For your mother's sake!"

"But—ah—why for the sake of my mothah?" repeated the curate blankly.

"Because she would sooner see you alive

than dead! Now, the instant the train stops, out you hop and go hell for leather away from the line! I'll settle the business with the guard."

Already the train was rapidly slowing down. The Rev. Crispin gazed at his rescuer with a vacant and horrified face.

"But—ah—it is quite dark! Where shall I go? Oh, what am I to do when I hop into the dark?"

The stranger again held up one finger and galvanised the unfortunate young man into attention.

"These are your directions; remember them carefully! Run like sin for an hour and a half. Lie low for twenty-four hours. Then go to the nearest magistrate; tell him that your name is Essington——"

"Essington?" said the curate.

"Essington," the stranger repeated impressively. "And say that you want to get back to Dr. Jenkinson at a place called 'The Retreat.' The magistrate will take steps to convey you there, and at last you will be safe! Now give me a fiver, and then be ready to jump out."

"A—a—why should I give you a——" stammered Crispin.

The stranger pointed to the warning printed beside the communication cord.

"That's the fine for pulling it," he said. "Quick, we have almost stopped!"

He pocketed five sovereigns and opened the carriage door.

"Oh, I hope I shall remember what to do!" cried the Rev. Crispin.

"Run like hell—lie low—go to magistrate!" his rescuer repeated. "Now, off with you!"

The Rev. Crispin Pytcher vanished into the night as the director had done not long before, while his understudy pulled up the window, settled himself in his seat, and assumed an expression as like that of the departed curate as he could achieve.

A few minutes later an extremely serious-looking guard came along the corridor and opened the compartment door.

"Did you pull the communication cord, sir?" he demanded.

The young clergyman in the corner seat gazed at him with a startled yet mildly innocent expression, rather like a frightened rabbit, the guard thought to himself.

"Was that the little chain I took hold of accidentally?" he exclaimed. "Oh, dear me, what a very unfortunate thing to do! The fact is, guard, I was trying to reach up to the rack, and suddenly the train began to shake, and I put out my hand and must have touched the cord. I only touched it very

gently, guard! It must have been very sensitive to have gone and stopped the train just because it was touched! Do all cords go off as easily?"

"They don't go off unless you pulls 'em," said the guard severely.

"Then you think I must have pulled it? Oh, what a nuisance! But you can start the train again now, guard. It's all right. I don't really want it stopped. Thank you so much for letting me know how it happened. I shall never touch a cord of any kind again!"

The guard still covered him with a reproving eye.

"I must ask you for your name, sir," said he.

"Pytcher is my name, guard," the young clergyman assured him, with an eager air of wishing to supply all the information within his power. "It is spelt with a *Y*. Please be sure to spell it like that. And Crispin is my Christian name. Please put 'The Reverend' before it."

The guard conscientiously wrote down these facts. When he looked up from his notebook he was surprised to see rather a different expression on Mr. Pytcher's innocent face. A peculiarly ingratiating smile now illumined it, and his eye was persuasion itself.

" I have just been noticing a very dreadful thing, guard," said he in a voice which exactly matched the smile. " There seems to be a fine of £5 for pulling that little cord, even by accident. A fiver! I really cannot afford all that, guard ; but here's a quid to yourself. Take it, like a dear good fellow ! "

The guard protested ; the guard looked cautiously over his shoulder and saw nobody in the corridor, and finally the guard succumbed.

" Made four quid over that transaction ! " said the Rev. Crispin to himself. " At this rate I am rapidly becoming what my young friend would call richah and richah."

The train was now once more in swift motion ; its roar rose continuous and exhilarating, and when he put his face to the window he could see dim shapes flying by and vanishing in a constant stream.

" I ought to be pretty safe for the present," he thought. " With any luck this costume should give me twenty-four hours' start. But after that ? " He gazed down at his sedate attire and shook his head. " These duds will be a mere trap once Crispin spreads the alarm," he reflected. " I must change 'em without any unnecessary delay. How can I raise a change ? And what's my programme in the meantime ? Can a curate do anything

amusing? I never happened to see one doing it, but it ought to be possible."

For some minutes he gazed thoughtfully up at the brown suit case on the rack, with the neat black lettering, and then of a sudden the light of inspiration flashed in his eye.

"By Gad, I'll risk it!" he murmured.

CHAPTER III

The New Curate

The Rev. Boniface Shuttleton-Bowles rose from the breakfast table and moved towards the door with the dignity inseparable from him. He was a fine figure of a man, just turned sixty, with a large smooth countenance, pleasantly florid and generally adorned by a beneficent and amiable expression, and with a peculiarly rich voice. His record was no less satisfactory than his appearance. He had rowed in the Oxford boat in his day, ridden to hounds while his weight permitted, and was still in request when his neighbours shot their coverts. Alike in the pulpit and at the lectern the rich quality of his voice and the excellence of his elocution gave pleasure to his congregation; while his sermons would not have disturbed a child of ten.

"When are you going down to the village, father?" asked his daughter.

"Oh, in about half an hour or so," said

Mr. Bowles easily. "There is no hurry. He will probably be unpacking."

"I do hope he has come, Boniface!" said his wife.

"Oh, surely, my dear! His mother was most explicit in her letter. He was to arrive at 11.20 last night."

"I'll walk down to the village with you," said Miss Bowles.

"Capital!" said the Rev. Boniface genially, for he was one of those rare and fortunate men who are genial quite early in the day.

He went into his study, lit his after-breakfast pipe, and had just settled himself comfortably in his easy chair, when he was somewhat startled to see the door open and hear the maid announce,

"Mr. Crispin Pytcher to see you, sir."

"This is unconscionably early!" exclaimed the rector, but by the time the new curate had entered the study, he had, outwardly at least, quite recovered his geniality.

"Ah, Mr. Pytcher," said he. "You are an early bird——"

He stopped in some surprise. The gentleman who entered had begun to bow as soon as he was within the door, and he was bowing still. In fact, the rector could already see

right down his collar. Then gradually the new curate returned to the perpendicular, and finally revealed an agreeable, but extremely serious countenance. The eyes struck the Rev. Boniface as quite lively during the instant he could see them, but the next moment they were rolling back almost into his head.

"My new rectah!" exclaimed Mr. Pytcher, enthusiastically. "Ah, how pleasant it is to meet one of whom I have heard so much! I do assure you, my dear sir, my mothah could not say enough in your favour!"

A study of certain correspondence found in the brown suit-case had put the reverend gentleman in possession of what he considered sufficient facts for the occasion, and he also felt entirely satisfied with his own ecclesiastical manner as he intoned these well-chosen sentences. It was, therefore, a little disappointing to observe his new rector's eyes open slightly wider than usual, without any ameliorating graciousness of expression.

"Really?" said the Rev. Boniface dryly. "I am—ah—relieved that you have heard of me favourably."

"Oh, mother was profoundly impressed," beamed Mr. Pytcher, "and so was my dear sistah!"

This was a shot at a venture, and it

evidently missed. The rector opened his eyes still wider.

"I was not aware you had a sister, Mr. Pytcher," said he.

"Confound Crispin! I could have sworn he was brought up among a dozen sisters," said Mr. Pytcher to himself. Aloud, however, he replied readily, "All the ladies are my sistahs. That is the beauty of our vocation, is it not, dear rectah?"

"Indeed?" replied the rector, somewhat coldly, Mr. Pytcher thought.

By this time Mr. Bowles had been able to form some impression of his new assistant. He was decidedly tall, he observed, and had the thing been credible, the rector would have judged that he had only recently completed his full growth, for his clothes were distinctly too small for him, and his display of wrist and ankle was a little distressing to one of Mr. Shuttleton-Bowles's æsthetic taste. But when he looked attentively at Mr. Pytcher's face, it became manifest that his growing days were past some considerable time ago. In fact, he seemed to be decidedly older than Mrs. Pytcher had led the rector to suppose.

On the other hand, Mr. Pytcher's manner and voice and the apparent calibre of his intellect bore out only too exactly certain

reports which had already reached the rector.

"I suspected he'd be an ass, but I did think he'd be presentably dressed!" said the Rev. Boniface to himself. "This is really most annoying!"

And then the new curate suddenly smiled, and there was something so insidiously attractive and infectious about his smile that the rector was almost ready to change his opinion on the instant.

"I notice a cigar box," said Mr. Pytcher in an ingratiating voice. "Dear rectah, would it be taking too great a liberty if I tried a little one?"

"Eh—ah—certainly; that's to say, if you smoke," replied the rector. "But Mrs. Pytcher told me most explicitly you were a somewhat strict non-smoker."

"Ah, my dear rectah, mothers do not always know their boys' little peccadilloes!" beamed the curate. "I was tempted to try one once, and now I really should like to try another!"

The practised style in which the Rev. Crispin Pytcher cut and lit his cigar made the rector doubt very seriously whether this was actually only his second offence.

"I should hardly suspect you to be a novice,

Mr. Pytcher," he observed with a distinct trace of severity.

"Oh, but I have practised with brown paper!" Mr. Pytcher assured him. "How to light it and cut it and all that. I like to do the thing in style, my dear rectah."

At this juncture, somewhat to the rector's relief, his daughter entered. She was attired for walking, and her slight start of surprise at finding the new curate already arrived at the rectory added just that touch of animation her face required. It was a pretty face, but with an expression a little cold, and even defiant in repose. Only a smouldering glow in her dark eyes hinted at warmer possibilities, and though her parents considered her on the whole a dutiful and satisfactory daughter, their Ida had always been something of a problem.

"My daughter—Mr. Pytcher," the rector introduced.

Again Mr. Pytcher bowed, but in a distinctly more graceful and orthodox fashion, Mr. Bowles noticed. (As a matter of fact, Mr. Pytcher himself had been fully under the impression that his first obeisance touched the high water-mark of ecclesiastical orthodoxy, and would have repeated it now, had he remembered to.)

"Ah, my dear young lady!" said he in

dulcet tones. "I have just been enjoying such a pleasant conversation with your good father. We shall get on like anything, I am sure! And you and I, also, my dear young lady, I trust, will be great friends!"

"If that's not the stuff to give 'em, I'm dashed!" he added to himself with excusable complacency.

Ida Shuttleton-Bowles looked at him for a single swift, searching instant before she answered, and during that intense, momentary scrutiny, there suddenly crossed his mind a little doubt whether he had given this dear young lady quite the right stuff after all. Then she spoke, and he observed with a connoisseur's interest a subtle, soft vibration in her voice reminiscent of entirely unecclesiastical experiences.

"We are having tennis this afternoon, Mr. Pytcher," she said. "I hope you will come. You do play, of course?"

Mr. Pytcher shot one glance at her and another at the rector, and decided to adapt his manner, as far as possible, to both.

"I play several games," he replied gently, but with an eloquent eye, and then added for the rector's benefit, "lawful exercise is not forbidden, I believe, dear rectah?"

Mr. Bowles's reply was directed at his daughter.

"We shall expect, then, to see Mr. Pytcher this afternoon. Meanwhile, my dear, we are having a little business conversation."

The young lady took the hint, and the gallant curate hastened to hold the door open for her. As she passed she seemed to throw him the faintest possible smile.

"Quite promising!" he said to himself, and then became exceedingly grave. The rector's eye was fixed very hard upon him, and its expression struck him as unsympathetic.

"We had now better have a little conversation about your duties," said the Rev. Boniface dryly, and with unmistakable emphasis on the last word.

"Time for me to move!" thought the new curate, but it was with every appearance of extreme enthusiasm that he replied:

"My duties? Oh, rather, I am frightfully keen on them! Mothers' meetings, baptisms—you'd like me to take them, of course? However, we can arrange all that later. I won't disturb you any longer now, rectah. But just before I go, there is one little favour I should like to ask. You don't mind, my dear rectah?"

The disarming smile seemed to arrest what was going to be a somewhat inclement answer.

"Well?" said the rector.

"Did my mother tell you I was an enthusiastic gardener? What! She never mentioned it? Dear me, how curious! I simply love working in my little garden, but I have no suitable attire. Can you lend me an old grey flannel suit? Or tweeds? I do not think it quite nice to work in my clerical garments. Do you?"

"I regret, Mr. Pytcher, that I cannot oblige you," replied the rector, somewhat coldly. "And I may add that your duties will not leave you much time for working in anybody's garden. I may also remind you that at present you have none of your own."

"It would be a great favour," pleaded Mr. Pytcher. "I am going to take a little house and garden immediately. . . ."

"I regret my inability to oblige you," repeated Mr. Bowles with considerable emphasis.

Considering that this request was Mr. Pytcher's chief object in taking up his present duties, the amiable spirit in which he took its refusal was highly creditable.

"Oh, my dear sir, don't mention it!" said he. "It really does not matter. I shall take a few cigars, instead—with your permission always, rectah."

As the cigars had been swiftly and adroitly conveyed to his pocket before he reached the

mention of permission, the Rev. Boniface evidently thought it unnecessary to reply; nor did he add anything further, beyond an extremely curt nod of dismissal.

"I am sure we shall get on splendidly together!" said Mr. Pytcher as he bowed himself out; yet when he had safely left the house, his amiable face assumed a somewhat less rapturous expression.

"I'm hanged if I'd have risked it if I hadn't banked on getting those clothes!" he said to himself, as he strolled thoughtfully down the road from the rectory to the little old-world village, where—as he had already discovered—there was not even the most modest tailoring establishment. "However, with any luck, I'm safe till to-morrow afternoon, anyhow, and why spoil a holiday by worrying?"

And thereupon he won the heart and for ever shook the faith of the village belle by launching a well-directed wink from beneath the shade of his clerical hat.

CHAPTER IV

IDA

"GOOD gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Shuttleton-Bowles. "Is that another pane smashed?"

"We shall have very little of our conservatory left, if Pytcher plays tennis here often," replied the rector. "Mind your head, my dear!"

Mrs. Bowles ducked just in time, and a tennis ball whizzed its way into the shrubberies.

"One would never have dreamt that such a mild-looking young man would play such a dashing game of tennis," said the lady. "He seems quite good, but so dreadfully reckless!"

"It appears to me," observed her husband, "that he is deliberately aiming his smashes at young Bashford's head. There, he's got him this time! Luckily it's only on the arm."

The new curate (looking very presentable

in a pair of white flannel trousers that covered his ankles) had indeed been exhibiting the most astonishing activity and dash. In partnership with a shy young lady in pale pink, he was opposing Ida Shuttleton-Bowles and a very confident-looking and beautifully be-flannelled young man, who at that moment was rubbing his arm with an air of less complacency than usual.

"That will teach him to look like a ready-made-tailor's dummy and make love to my best girl!" said Mr. Pytcher to himself.

From this it may be judged that his first passages with Miss Ida had promised favourably; and that Mr. Bashford also appeared to appreciate that young lady.

"Almost got him again!" said Crispin to himself, as a terrific smash whizzed within an inch of his rival's ear, and a distant crash announced the collapse of another pane in the conservatory.

And all the while Ida watched him furtively, and at rare intervals shot him a smile, the import of which left him a trifle puzzled, but more desirous than ever of a quiet half-hour in a shady corner.

At the end of the set he was a little surprised to see Mr. Bashford stroll towards him with an expression not at all hostile, but on the

contrary rather suggestive of overtures. Friendly though Mr. Pytcher habitually felt towards his fellow-mortals, this young man displeased him, and he was at no trouble to assume an accommodating manner.

"I say," began Bashford, "isn't your name Crispin Pytcher?"

"I believe they baptised me something like that," replied Mr. Pytcher distantly.

"And weren't you up at Anselm's Hall?"

Mr. Pytcher pricked up his ears and suddenly became more wary.

"I was," said he.

"Then you must remember me—'Binks' Bashford, of B.N.C.?"

"Oh, by Gad, Binks, of course! You looked very familiar, but I couldn't place you at first."

Mr. Binks Bashford looked him up and down curiously.

"You've changed in the most extraordinary way," he observed. "I wouldn't have recognised you."

"I had a very severe illness," explained Mr. Pytcher. "All my friends remark on the singular difference it has made."

"You seem a lot older," added Mr. Bashford, who was a young man devoid of diffidence, and also—it seemed to Mr. Pytcher—of tact.

"The flight of time is said to have that effect," said Mr. Pytcher with delicate irony.

His tone seemed to surprise Mr. Bashford as much as his appearance.

"Your manner has quite changed, too," he remarked.

"While your manners seem incapable of much development," replied Mr. Pytcher, and with a polite smile he turned away, and sought the society of Miss Bowles.

For some time, however, he was unsuccessful. Even his audacity and enterprise failed to separate Miss Bowles from her guests, and he even had the displeasing experience of sitting on a grassy bank with the silent lady in pink, watching Binks and Ida once more play in partnership, without the satisfaction of being able to aim a single smash in Mr. Bashford's direction. He was further a little disconcerted to observe a short, confidential talk between them at the end of the set, and unquestionably Binks Bashford was glancing more than once in his direction.

"I must get hold of her and put things right!" he said to himself; and thereupon he rose, and with a happy mixture of gallantry and effrontery swept Miss Ida out of the crowd and down a shady path to a solitary seat.

"This is much pleasanter!" said he, as he seated himself by her side and threw her his most agreeable and confidential smile.

She smiled back, and again he was struck by something unfathomable in her eye, and the curious suggestion of possibilities in her smile.

"I have just realised," she said, "that we have several friends in common, Mr. Pytcher."

Mr. Pytcher's intellect instantly became at its most acute.

"Really?" said he with a vast air of interest. "Who, for instance?"

"The Hardymans used to go to your church, didn't they?"

"Rather! I remember them . . ."—he hesitated for a single instant whether he should say "very well," and then decided on—"among my kindest friends."

"You used to dance with Blanche Hardyman, didn't you?"

"Frequently! A beautiful dancer."

He shot a swift glance at her and decided that Blanche probably was a beautiful dancer.

"Leave well alone!" he told himself, and endeavoured to divert the conversation into safer channels.

"But I am much more interested in my new friends," he added with a gallant air.

Ida smiled back, but refused to follow his lead.

"And the Beetletons, too," she said. "They were great friends of yours, weren't they?"

"The Beetletons?" he exclaimed. "Very much so! I practically lived at their house at one time."

She smiled.

"It is a curious name, isn't it?" said she. "One you would hardly forget."

"I remember it vividly," he assured her.

She turned her smouldering eyes full on him and for a moment said nothing. Then in a low voice she asked:

"Why are you masquerading as Crispin Pytcher?"

Mr. Essington had enjoyed, among other experiences, a number of surprises in his life, but none more startling than this. Yet his outward composure was unruffled.

"I beg your pardon?" he inquired with an air of innocent surprise.

"There are no such people as the Hardymans and the Beetletons," she replied quite quietly; "or anyhow I don't know any."

Mr. Essington looked straight into her

eyes, and then he smiled his most audacious and candid smile.

"How much start will you give me?" he inquired. "Will you sit here till I'm safely over that garden wall? That will give me a sporting chance, and then you can blow your whistle and let them after me."

Ida merely laughed.

"I won't promise you anything till you tell me who you are and why you are doing this."

He looked at her curiously.

"I believe you are going to turn out even nicer than I thought," said he. "First of all, tell me how much you know."

"I only know that you aren't Crispin Pytcher. I had a suspicion the very moment I saw you, and when Mr. Bashford told me he was up at Oxford with you and that you had changed utterly and didn't seem to recognise him, I felt certain. Who are you really?"

Though Mr. Essington hesitated, one would never have guessed it. "I want to know a little more about this ambiguous lady first!" he said to himself; but with hardly a pause he answered with a question.

"Don't you want to know what has become of the genuine Crispin?"

She shrugged her shoulders

"I don't much care what becomes of curates!" she answered scornfully.

"A parson's daughter!" he exclaimed.

In the same tone she answered again:

"That is probably why. I have seen too much of parsons! I don't include father," she added, "but curates—I am absolutely sick of them!"

"So you are rather relieved to find I am not one?"

"Who are you and why did you come here?" she asked again.

"Partly for air and partly for exercise."

Her eyes contracted.

"You must tell me more than that," she said.

In his present spirited condition, Mr. Essington would have vastly preferred to keep the conversation going on cheerful, affectionate, or romantic lines. He would willingly, indeed, have offered the lady her choice of these, but even the most buoyant could scarcely fail to perceive that Miss Ida Shuttleton-Bowles demanded a serious answer, and meant to get it; also that she did not seem an easy lady to deceive.

"I am endeavouring," he confessed, "to escape from a conspiracy against my liberty!"

She looked at him intently for a moment and then asked quietly:

" Are you really guilty ? "

" Guilty ! " he exclaimed with a slight start, and then perceiving that this unfathomable young lady showed no sign of horror at the possibility, he instantly went on, " What if I am ? Would you be willing to shield the unfortunate even if they chanced to be guilty ? "

" I don't know," she answered thoughtfully.

Mr. Essington decided that it was scarcely safe to chance it.

" Of course I am really innocent ! " he declared with a manly air.

Again she looked at him intently.

" I wonder if you are ! " she murmured.

" Confound her ! " said he to himself, " I'm hanged if I know which she would prefer ! " But before the adaptable gentleman could decide as to his own guilt, the portly form of the rector loomed up in the shady path, an elderly lady by his side.

" Ah, Ida, here you are ! " said he. " Here is your Aunt Mary looking for you."

The girl sprang up and the curate had just time to whisper :

" Give me a chance ! "

Her eyes rested on him for the fraction of a second, but what they betokened baffled him quite. The next minute she was greeting the elderly lady, and for the remainder of the

afternoon Mr. Crispin Pytcher had to content himself with one single exchange of silent glances.

"What will she do?" he asked himself as he walked back to his lodgings in the village. "I never met a woman who beat me more completely! In any case I had meant to clear out by to-morrow afternoon. It had better be first thing after breakfast now."

CHAPTER V

The Man in the Bowler Hat

At quarter to seven next morning a small man in a bowler hat alighted from a dog cart in the road before the rectory gates. The horse between the shafts looked as though it had come fast and far, and the man on the driver's seat was a stranger to the village.

"Just wait for me 'ere," said the man in the bowler, and walked briskly up the gravel drive.

He pulled the rectory bell once and waited, and then he pulled it again.

"Seem to be all abed still!" he said to himself and stepped back to survey the windows. All the blinds at that side of the house were still down, but as he stood there gazing up, one blind was cautiously pulled a little to the side, and for a moment he caught a glimpse of a pair of bright eyes looking down at him. They seemed to be a lady's eyes, he thought. They vanished the next moment, and the man returned to the bell. This time a maid appeared.

"Rev. Shuttleton-Bowles in?" inquired the man. "In bed, is he? Well, tell him I wants to see 'im most particular and immediate, and that it's something to do with 'is curate. No name, just you give 'im that message, underlinin' the words 'immediate' and 'curate.'"

As he passed through the hall towards the rector's study, the man looked quickly upward. It seemed to him he heard a door being closed on the floor above, but nobody came downstairs.

In a quarter of an hour or so the rector appeared, unshaved, but clothed and as dignified as ever. He saw, standing on the rug before the unlit fire, a small individual whom at the first glance he put down as insignificant; but at the second, he was struck by the alertness of his beady little eyes, and the keen, ferrety cut of the whole face.

"Rev. Shuttleton-Bowles, sir, I presume?" said the man. "You'll excuse an early call, sir, I 'ope, when I tells you I've brought news of your curate."

The rector stared very hard.

"Do you mean Mr. Pytcher?" he demanded.

The man nodded.

"That's 'im, sir. 'E's turned up at Dr. Jenkinson's asylum, givin' hisself out to be

Mr.——" the man checked himself and then went on rather quickly, " describin' hisself, in fact, as another genelman what had run away. He was wearin' that same genelman's clothes and was sent by a magistrate in charge of a policeman."

Mr. Shuttleton-Bowles passed his hand across his brow like a man dumbfounded.

" Mr. Pytcher—in another gentleman's clothes—in an asylum ! " he repeated.

" We thought you'd be wonderin' what 'ad become of him, so I come straight by train to Minton-Parsley and 'ired a trap. Only way I could get to you before noon, sir."

" I—ah—am much obliged, I am sure," said the rector. " It was very good of you, but—ah—I am afraid I don't quite follow you. How did you say this happened ? "

" We don't quite know 'ow, sir, Mr. Pytcher's statements soundin' unreliable. 'E *says* he met this said genelman in a train and was told some cock-and-bull story about murderers bein' after 'im, and so they changed clothes so as 'e could escape, but we thought as perhaps, sir, you could throw some light on it."

The rector shook his head, staring the while blankly at his visitor.

" It is totally incomprehensible to me ! I thought Mr. Pytcher seemed somewhat

eccentric when he called upon me yesterday morning, but——"

The little man's voice rose nearly to a shout as he interrupted.

" Mr. Pytcher called upon you yesterday mornin' ! "

" Certainly."

The little man's voice sank now almost to a whisper.

" Mr. Pytcher was in the 'ands of the magistrate yesterday mornin'. 'E arrived at Dr. Jenkinson's in the afternoon ! "

" Good heavens ! " boomed the rector. " Then who was the person who called upon me ? "

The little man's gimlet eyes fairly danced with glee.

" The man I'm after ! The man what run away from Dr. Jenkinson's and changed clothes with this 'ere Pytcher ! Do you mean to say he'd the impudence to come down 'ere *as* Pytcher ? What a bit o' luck ! We've got 'im now fair and square ! Where is he, sir ? "

" Lodging in the village, I believe. In fact, I know for certain he is there. I happened to hear reports of his conduct last night which disquieted me greatly. He was —ah—giving something in the nature of a musical entertainment."

The little man slapped his leg.

"We'll entertain 'im right enough, sir! It'll be the early bird that catches the worm this time, and no mistake!"

"What is this gentleman's real name?" inquired the rector.

The man looked at him curiously and for an instant seemed to hesitate. Then he answered glibly:

"Mr. Smith, sir."

Mr. Shuttleton-Bowles was a man with some experience of the world. He looked at his visitor very hard.

"Is that his real name?" he demanded.

"Well, sir, possibly it ain't quite all of it. Fact is, sir, 'is friends is particular anxious not to 'ave his behaviour talked about, as it were. Well-connected genelman 'e is, sir, and his relations is naturally sensitive."

"Ah!" said the rector. "Yes, I can understand that. And you, I presume, are one of Dr. Jenkinson's staff?"

It was a peculiarity of the small man that whenever he made what appeared to be his most candid statements, he prefaced them with a very odd, cautious glance. He shot this glance now at the rector and then answered apparently in the most straightforward manner:

"Not exactly, sir. This genelman's friends

and relations is also 'unting very particular anxiously for him, and I'm bein' employed by them. But I works so to speak 'and in 'and with Jenkinson's lot, and I'll see him safe back there right enough. No fears of that, sir!"

"I see," said the rector thoughtfully. "Well, that being so, what steps do you mean to take? I should not desire—ah—a scandal in the village."

"Oh, if I gets enough men together, sir, we'll lift him that quiet nobody will notice nothing. There's me, and there's the man what drove me over, and if you could let us 'ave two more, sir, there won't be no danger of a fuss with him."

"I can manage that for you," said the rector. "In fact, I might even lend a hand myself! That sort of thing was—ah—quite in my line once upon a time. If you just wait till I have shaved, I'll come with you."

"No time like the present, sir, for catchin' the early worm," his visitor suggested. "The sooner we gets at 'im, the surer we are of nabbin' 'im."

If there was one thing the Rev. Boniface disliked more than another, it was the modern craze for hurry.

"Time enough when I have shaved and you have had a cup of tea," he said easily. "Come

along, I'll tell them to give you the tea. We'll lose no time once we set off."

As he went upstairs again it occurred to him that instead of alarming his wife he would just speak a quiet word to Ida and tell her to break the news after he was safely gone. He knocked at his daughter's door and then knocked again. And then at last he pushed it open and peeped in. The blinds were up and the room was empty.

"Bless me!" he said to himself. "Ida is up very early this morning! I didn't hear her about the house either. Can she have gone out already?"

However, he was not a man to worry about trifles, and a few minutes later he was shaving himself very complacently.

"The episode has its awkward side," he reflected, "but after all I am relieved to think that the individual who abstracted two handfuls of my best cigars is not really my curate."

CHAPTER VI

A Near Thing

Since this narrative can make small claim to merit apart from its undeviating accuracy, it must be admitted frankly that Mr. Shuttleton-Bowles had been correctly informed concerning his curate's conduct on the previous evening. The Rev. Crispin had, in fact, strolled into the Blue Boar after dinner, made the acquaintance of several local gentlemen occupied with tankards, placed them entirely at their ease within five minutes, converted the gathering into an impromptu concert of the most spirited nature, assisted the other gentlemen to carry one of their number home to his family, and finally retired to rest, sober yet evidently with a premonition that a morning in bed would be beneficial, for instructions were subsequently discovered on his sitting-room table directing his landlady to " Call me not earlier than ten o'clock, serious news from my mother necessitates repose. C. P."

It was therefore with considerable trepidation that Mrs. Higgins ventured to tap upon his door at 7.15 to inform him that Miss Shuttleton-Bowles had come with a message from the rectory. She was, however, relieved to hear, instead of rebuke or expostulation, an instantaneous creaking of the bed; and within an incredibly short space of time Mr. Pytcher was closeted with Miss Bowles in his sitting-room, and to all appearances clad.

"Some one has come for you!" she said the moment he had closed the door behind him.

Her voice was quick and eager and her eyes were very bright. Mr. Pytcher, on his part, wasted no more time than she did.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"A small man with a large bowler hat and ferrety eyes rather close together. He looks like a detective!"

"Small—large bowler—eyes close together," he repeated thoughtfully. "Don't know him. Probably he is a detective. How did he come?"

"In a dog-cart."

"And what did he say?"

"I only overheard him asking for father and sending a message to say it was about his curate. Then I dressed as quick as I could and came to warn you."

He looked at her for a moment with an odd smile.

"So that's the sort you are! What a brick! You ran the risk of my being guilty?"

"I'm a sinner myself—at heart anyhow," she confessed. "I'm choked with my life here! Anyone who has committed a crime—Oh, it's better than being respectable and smug, and—and a curate!"

"Unfortunately I haven't committed a crime—yet," he confessed. "But, by Jingo, I shall to reward you!"

"But then why is that man after you? What have you really done? Who . . ."

She stopped abruptly and listened; and in a moment they were both at the window for one instant, and the next drawing cautiously back. A four-wheeled dogcart was driving up the village street, the rector and a strange driver in front, the rector's gardener and a fourth person behind. The fourth person was looking over his shoulder to speak to the rector, and they could both see his face.

"That's the man!" said Ida.

"Don't know him," said Mr. Pytcher, and then he exclaimed suddenly, "By Gad!"

"What is it?" she whispered. Her hand was on his arm and he could feel it tremble.

He said nothing for a minute, but watched

the performance in the road. The dog cart had stopped on the other side of the way, and the rector was speaking to a boy on the pavement. He was the only other person to be seen in the village at that early hour, and evidently Mr. Bowles was directing him to stand by the horse, for he moved to its head, while the four all got out of the trap. And then Mr. Pytcher turned to his friend:

"Run downstairs," he directed, "take Mrs. Higgins into the front parlour, and close the door! Ask her to let you lie low in her back premises till your father has gone, but keep her talking for a minute or two, even though they knock at the door. Then go off and lie low; but be sure you keep her talking the whole of two minutes—with the door closed!"

For a moment she looked at him, puzzled and almost distrustful. Then she saw him slip off his shoes and her face lit up with a quick smile.

"Dearest girl!" he exclaimed, and for an instant dropped his shoes and enfolded Ida Shuttleton-Bowles in his arms. Then she started.

Three minutes later she opened the door of the front parlour and slipped out into the passage.

"Just give me time to get out of sight!" she whispered to Mrs. Higgins.

Knocks were already rattling on the front door and Mrs. Higgins had grown too flustered to answer. Ida fled from her on tiptoe and closed the kitchen door behind her. From the kitchen a back door opened into a strip of garden and she saw that this door was ajar.

"Ah!" she murmured, and opening it further, peeped out. But there was no one visible at the back of the house. She put her head further out, and then she noticed that a path ran from the back door round the house to the front.

Meanwhile Mrs. Higgins had opened the front door, and her feelings on perceiving there not only the rector but his three companions became so acute that she could barely stammer out her answer.

"Mr. Pytcher is at home, I presume?" said the Rev. Boniface.

"Ye—es, sir—" said she.

"Still in bed, I suppose?"

"N—no sir. He's in his sitting-room."

She noticed the rector exchanging glances with a small man at his shoulder.

"Goin' to bolt," said the small man in a hoarse whisper. "We're only just in time!"

" Follow me ! " commanded the rector, and in single file the four creaked upstairs.

" Don't knock ! " whispered the small man as the rector paused before the sitting-room door. " Just walk right in ! "

The Rev. Boniface turned the handle and walked right in. And then he stopped abruptly.

" He's not here ! " he boomed.

The other three likewise looked blankly round the room, and then, still in his hoarse whisper, the small man turned to the driver and commanded :

" Stand by the door, Jim, and don't let 'im rush you. He must be be'ind them window curtains. It's the only place ! "

The other three advanced towards the window and then simultaneously stopped.

" Blarst 'im ! " roared the small man, not in a whisper now.

Through the window they commanded an excellent view of their dogcart. It was no longer stationary, but in the act of turning round ; while the boy who had been standing by the horse's head was now stepping aside and at the same time respectfully touching his cap. His salute was being courteously returned by the driver, a gentleman attired in black with a wideawake felt hat which somewhat obscured his features.

"That's Pytcher himself!" boomed the rector.

The small man leapt to the window and rattled on the panes.

"Stop 'im, you young owl!" he shouted. "Get 'old of that 'orse's 'ead again, will you!"

Even had the youth been able to comprehend the import of this demonstration, it was now too late to catch the horse's head, or any other part of him. The dogcart was moving down the road at a fast trot, and over his shoulder its new driver raised his whip in parting salutation to the faces at the window.

"And he didn't see *me*!" sighed a girl who was peeping cautiously round the corner of Mrs. Higgins' house.

CHAPTER VII

EXIT CRISPIN

IN the vicinity of the market town of Summerdean, a clerical gentleman driving a four-wheeled dogcart, turned out of the main road and walked his horse across a pasture field towards a wide wood at the further side. He had evidently driven far and furiously, for his horse was covered with lather and dead lame. In fact, since he left the village of Gorington he had come most of the way at a gallop, and had only paused once, to purchase a bottle of lemonade and a bag of mixed biscuits at a wayside shop. On that occasion he had made particular inquiries as to the shortest road to the town of Kenton and the train service from there, and then at the first cross road turned off towards Summerdean. So that there seemed fair grounds for hoping that subsequent inquirers would have a little trouble in discovering his precise whereabouts.

In spite of this, the clerical gentleman

looked extremely thoughtful as he crossed the pasture field.

"The first thing is to get rid of this dog-cart," he said to himself, "and the next is to secure a change of clothes. I've no doubt I could buy an outfit in this place Summerdean, but towns are the very devil till I get rid of Crispin Pytcher! It would be known all over the country in no time that I'd walked in in clerical duds, and exactly what I had purchased instead. There must be some better way than that if one could only think of it!"

At the edge of the wood he jumped out, led the horse and trap through a gate and up a track till it was well out of view from the high road, and then tied his steed to a tree and walked on through the wood alone.

"If one could only find a headless corpse of about my own figure, and change clothes with it, how convenient it would be!" he thought. "Unfortunately one never seems to find exactly the article one wants. If I did discover a corpse, it would probably be five feet high and decked with a full beard."

He was aroused from these reflections by the sound of voices ahead. Their shrillness and the way in which they suddenly rose and fell suggested for a moment a tragedy in the wood, but as he advanced quickly in

that direction it became clear that they were cries merely of pleasure. A minute or two later he was looking through the last fringe of trees out on to a very animated scene.

A sluggish river, rather wide just at that point, bounded the wood, and in this pool a party of schoolboys were bathing. Though the month was September, the day was very warm and bright, and after his recent exertions, the adventurer looked at them a little enviously. And then, as his eye began to take in the whole scene, it suddenly brightened.

"Just an off chance!" he said to himself.

There were about a dozen boys altogether and they seemed to have ridden over from some school in the neighbourhood, for their bicycles were leaning against the trees, while a stoutish, hearty-looking gentleman of about forty, evidently their master, stood on the bank and now and then shouted out instructions to some beginner.

"Now then, Bailey minor, keep up your chin! You've come here to swim in the river, not drink it up! Jones! You're getting puffed! Come back into shallow water and have a rest! Good day, sir. Yes, it *is* very warm."

These last remarks were addressed to an exceedingly amiable looking clergyman who

had just wandered out of the wood and addressed the master with much courtesy. The affable tone of that gentleman's reply evidently encouraged the stranger to further advances.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said with a singularly winning air, "My name is Pytcher, and I am the new curate at Gorington. Possibly you may already be acquainted with my rector, Mr. Shuttleton-Bowles."

"I know him slightly," said the schoolmaster genially. "My own name is Davidson and you can guess my profession!"

He pointed to the boys with a laugh, and Mr. Pytcher laughed very pleasantly too. At the same time his eye was stealthily and swiftly running up and down Mr. Davidson's figure.

"They'll be a bit loose in the girth for me, and they're damned unfashionable," he said to himself. "But they'll have to do."

After a few minutes' friendly conversation, Mr. Pytcher said with an irresistibly persuasive note in his voice:

"Are you a swimmer yourself, Mr. Davidson? If you felt inclined, I should feel dreadfully tempted to challenge you to a little race across the river! It is so very warm, and I love swimming!"

He had chosen a moment when one or two

of the boys had come close inshore, and he now turned to them and asked:

"Would you like, my dear boys, to see a little race between Mr. Davidson and me, across the river?"

The suggestion was taken up with vast enthusiasm.

"Oh, yes, sir! Do come in, sir! We'll all back you, Mr. Davidson!"

There was no resisting the challenge and the applause it produced. Mr. Davidson laughed and proceeded promptly to unbutton his coat.

"I've had a bit of a cold and I didn't mean to go in to-day," said he, "but if you put me on my mettle I suppose I must!"

The curate was no less prompt with his preparations, and in a few minutes two simultaneous splashes and the loud cheers of the spectators showed that the race had begun. The course agreed on was across the river and back again, and from the first it was pretty clear that the race was a good thing for the church, for the curate swam in the most powerful style and steadily forged ahead. Encouraged by the shouts of his pupils, the schoolmaster chased him gamely, but he was beaten at last by several yards.

"Now, my dear boys," cried the winner,

"I shall give you a chance of revenge! We shall have a handicap. I shall start scratch and race you all!"

This challenge was accepted with equal alacrity. As Mr. Pytcher had to dive in last, it was left to him to start the race. At the word "One!" the boy with the longest start dived in, and so on they went one after another till he had counted up to forty, when he himself dived in last of all. At the word "thirty!" Mr. Davidson started off, and as he struck out he could hear the remaining ten being counted out, and then a splash behind him.

"I'm keeping well ahead of the fellow this time!" he said to himself as he approached the other bank and there was no sign of the curate drawing alongside. At this point the course was so crowded with splashing small boys, some on their outward and some on their return journey, that it became a little difficult to see exactly what was happening. By the time they got back again, however, affairs had cleared up somewhat. The curate was certainly beaten this time; a promising young swimmer had come in first, Mr. Davidson was second, and as one after another the other competitors reached the bank, it became manifest that the whole school had beaten Mr. Pytcher.

" Hurrah ! " cried a chorus of shrill voices. " Well done ! Hurrah ! "

And then, all at once, silence fell upon them. A dreadful thought had suddenly assailed them.

" Good heavens ! " cried Mr. Davidson, staring back at the river. " What has become of the curate ? "

With startled faces and increasing agitation the twelve boys gazed at each ripple, looking for some sign of the vanished Pytcher ; but never a sign was there to be seen.

" Who saw him last ? " cried the master, but for some moments nobody answered. Then one squeaky voice said :

" I didn't see him at all, sir ! "

" Nor I, nor I," chimed in the others.

" I'm sure I heard him dive in behind me ! " said Mr. Davidson. " Can he have knocked his head against the bottom ? "

" Is that him, sir ? " cried a very small boy, pointing to a large dark object slowly drifting with the current.

" That's only a log," said Mr. Davidson, and then he paused and stared at it. " It wasn't here before. Who threw it in ? "

Nobody answered for a moment and then an intelligent lad suggested :

" That might have been the splash you heard, sir."

Suddenly at the top of his small voice Bailey minor shouted out :

" Look, sir ! There's a naked man riding away on a bicycle ! "

The master looked and, sure enough, there was a tall, pink figure, clad only in a cap and a pair of boots, pedalling for dear life away from the river, and holding the while under one arm a large bundle of clothes.

" My God, it's the curate ! " cried Mr. Davidson. " What the——" but at that point he remembered the example he ought to set, and finished his sentence aside. At the same time he leapt up on the bank and hurried to the spot where he and Mr. Pytcher had left their clothes.

" He has left his clothes behind him ! " was his first exclamation ; his second was, " The scoundrel has taken mine ! "

" I wonder whose bike he has got, sir," said a small voice behind him.

Thirteen naked figures made a simultaneous rush for the bicycles, and counted precisely twelve.

" Mine's here, sir ! " " And mine ! "—" And mine ! " cried a chorus of voices.

" He has taken my bicycle, too ! By Heavens, when I catch him ! " shouted their master, no longer the genial gentleman of ten minutes ago ; and then with a very grim

look he turned to his biggest boy. " Lend me your bicycle, Hayward ! "

" Please, sir," stammered Hayward, " the —the back tyre is quite flat, some one has taken out the valve."

" Yours, Wilson ! " thundered Mr. Davidson.

" Please, sir, I'm—I'm afraid my valve is taken out too ! "

Unfortunately there was no doubt about it. Twelve deflated bicycles bore eloquent testimony to the vanished curate's thoroughness and resource. And meanwhile that ex-ornament to the church was saying to himself complacently :

" Exit Crispin Pytcher at last ! "

CHAPTER VIII

Annette

While Mr. Essington was speeding through the night in the down express, his old and attached friend, Mr. Mason, was standing before his library fire with the dust of travel still upon his boots, and his eyes restlessly on the door. It was the large, well-lined library of a country house. From the map on the wall one could judge that it stood in a county many miles removed from London, and from the utter silence that prevailed, one might further guess that it was situate in a quiet and remote part of that county.

On a small table near the fire were a siphon and a decanter. The tumbler was in Mr. Mason's hand, and as he waited he finished it at a gulp, like a man who needed a little stimulant. But all the while his eyes were on the door.

In a minute or two it opened exceedingly quietly, and there entered a trim little woman in black. For an instant she stood

with her fingers on the handle, and then still more quietly she opened it again and glanced out. After this precaution she advanced demurely into the room.

"Do you suspect anybody?" Mr. Mason asked sharply, yet in a voice instinctively a little hushed.

"Everybody!" smiled the little woman. "I suspect on princeeple. One learns to be wise."

Her eyes were very black and very bright, her face was small and not so many years ago had evidently been pretty above the average, her manner was propriety itself, and her English was almost perfect, with merely a piquant little trace of accent.

"Anything happened?" he inquired.

"Only that you have been away too long," she answered.

"I couldn't help that; something devilish awkward has happened."

A trace of apprehension appeared in the black eyes.

"Awkward?" she repeated. "What is it? Remember, I am not going to run any more risks than I can help! You told me there was no danger. . . ."

"There isn't," he interrupted. "I assure you, Annette, that it is merely something that will be put right to-morrow. I am taking steps. There's nothing to worry about."

" Yet you do look worried," she persisted.

He gave a very creditably hearty laugh.

" I'm sick of travelling by slow trains, and a bit cross," he said. " That's all. But what do you mean by saying I was away too long ? "

" I mean that when she is left alone she thinks and wonders."

" What has become of . . . ? " he paused with a frown.

Annette nodded.

" Of him. Yes, naturally."

" Damn him ! " he muttered.

She gave a little contemptuous laugh.

" That will do no good ! You have got to make her think of you instead."

" I've been trying my best. We—we seem to me to be getting on excellently ; don't you think so ? "

" As the young innocent Miss and the kind middle-aged gentleman she calls ' Cousin Harry ' ; yes, excellently ! But that is not how you weesh to get on ; is it ? "

" No," he confessed, " it isn't ; but if I begin too soon on the other lines, I may spoil everything. I know something about women, Annette."

" Oh, yes, sir ; I am quite sure of that ! " she laughed. " But this is a very deeficult case—very deeficult ! Oh, she is so innocent !

What would she not believe, after what she is believing now ! "

" You seem to find it amusing," he observed.

" But who would not ? A girl who shall come to a single gentleman's house and be told that his sister is unwell and cannot come to-day to chaperon, and yet shall suspect nothing ! And then in two days more she is told a telegram has come to say the sister remains unwell ; and still she suspects nothing ! I did not believe at first it would be possible to deceive her so. But she might be a nun out of a convent. The only trouble is—" she paused and her voice became very impressive, " that sweet innocence would get a dreadful shock if she found out—*too soon !* "

Mr. Mason had looked a trifle uncomfortable during this speech, but its last words made him glance at the speaker quickly and curiously.

" Too soon—what do you mean ? "

" I mean before Mr. Mason has taken the place of Mr. Reedley in her heart ! "

" She knows that creature Ridley is out of the question—that her guardians won't hear of it ; doesn't she ? "

" Oh, yes ! And I have told her *such* bad tales of Mr. Reedley ! Oh, with a young girl

like that and a gentleman like you, you will conquer if you take care. But you must walk very careful ! "

" Now we are back to the old difficulty," said he, " how to change this ' cousin Harry ' business, and—and her idea of my being so much older—not that I'm in the least bit too old for her——"

" Oh, no ! " said Annette tactfully.

" But still, if she looks upon me in that light, well, it's devilish difficult to alter our footing without frightening her. As you say, I mustn't do it too soon. But when *is* too soon ? How can I tell ? "

She smiled knowingly.

" Oh, I can help you there ! Move, but do not go too fast, and wait till I say it is safe. I talk much with her ; we are good friends ! "

For a moment Harry Mason looked at her as though something in this slim, quick-witted, demure, little woman displeased him. And then he seemed to shake the feeling off him, and his face hardened again.

" Has she gone to bed yet ? " he asked.

" No ; she is still in the drawing-room—waiting to see Cousin Harry when he comes home ! You had better go to her now, sir."

He moved a pace forward from the fire-place and then stopped and frowned thoughtfully at the carpet.

"Look here, Annette," said he, "nothing has happened that one need worry about; not yet, anyhow. Still, somebody is at large who ought—well, who ought not to be. And somebody else tried to follow me when I was on my way home."

"To follow you!" she exclaimed apprehensively.

"Oh, that was miles away, when I was coming home by train; and, in any case, I got rid of him effectually."

"And the other who is at large; it is her guardian, Mr. Ess—what is his name?"

"What the devil do you know about it?" he exclaimed.

"I make a point to find out everything," she said simply, and then looked at him intently, doubt again in her eye. "You told me everything was quite safe—nothing illegal—only a leetle stratagem. But this man—I see you are afraid what he might do?"

"He can only be troublesome so long as he is at liberty," he said emphatically, "and even then it is simply because one never knows what he may take it into his head to do next. But he *can't* remain at liberty; it's impossible; steps have been taken, and to-morrow morning I expect a wire to say they have got him again."

"And then it will be all right?"

CHAPTER IX

COUSIN HARRY

As Mr. Mason entered his drawing-room, a young girl sprang up with an exclamation of pleasure. She was of middle height, slender and dainty. Her light brown hair was simply done, her charming little face was lit with a smile of singular simplicity and candour, and her blue eyes were large and tender, and innocence itself.

"Oh, I am so glad you are back at last, Cousin Harry!" she exclaimed with a little sigh of relief.

"Been feeling lonely, Beatrix?" he asked with a smile such as neither Dr. Jenkinson nor Annette had seen on his face that day.

He came up to her and took her hands. She let hers lie there as if he had been a brother.

"A little," she confessed, and then asked, "How did you find your sister? I do hope she is better, and coming here soon!"

"My sister?" he said a little awkwardly. "Er—why——"

"Oh, I thought you had gone to see Mrs. Quintard! Annette told me you had."

"Why the devil couldn't she have warned me she had said so?" said Mr. Mason's eye; but the next moment Mr. Mason's voice answered readily. "Yes, I did go down to see my sister, only, well, I didn't tell you I was going, because—er—I was afraid you might be disappointed if I didn't find her well enough to come back with me."

"And isn't she?"

"Not yet, I am sorry to say."

She tried to withdraw her hands and sit down. His own increased their pressure. She looked up at him in sudden surprise; whereupon he let go and turned away. Again his eye spoke for him.

"How the deuce can one get on at this rate!" it said.

"I am very sorry, too," said Beatrix.

"Yes; I am afraid I am dull company for you."

"Oh, no, I don't mean that, Cousin Harry!" she assured him. "You have been very kind. But it must be rather a bother for you, having a girl thrown on your hands like this, and I hope Mrs. Quintard will come soon—for your sake!"

A very gallant answer might well have rewarded this speech, but its perfect honesty warned him.

"Oh, I enjoy entertaining you immensely," he said.

"You are very polite, Cousin Harry!" she laughed.

For a moment he looked at her and hesitated. Then he smiled affectionately down on her.

"I say, Beatrix, don't you think 'Cousin Harry' is a little formal between you and me by this time?"

"Oh, I know, of course, I am not really your cousin. But you asked me to call you Cousin Harry."

"Oh, yes, of course! But what I mean is —well, 'Harry' is shorter and simpler, and— ha, ha!—not exactly sweeter, but I'd sooner you called me simply Harry."

From the deep easy chair where she was sitting, she looked up at him shyly and doubtfully.

"I really——" she hesitated, "well, you are so much older, I feel it would be a little forward of me!"

Once more his eye delivered a pregnant exclamation for him; and once more his voice answered quite differently.

"Oh, but if *I* don't mind . . ." he began.

" I'd sooner keep to Cousin Harry."

" Very well, then. And shall I call you Cousin Beatrix ? "

" Oh, but I am quite a kid ! " she laughed.

" Damn ! " said the eye.

For a minute or two there was silence, while he stood with his back to the fire, glancing sometimes down at her fresh, inviting face, and then moodily across the room. And gradually he became conscious that there was something weighing on her mind, too.

He studied her attentively, and then broke into an encouraging laugh.

" A penny for your thoughts, Beatrix ! "

She looked up with a slight start, and for a moment seemed confused. Then she asked :

" Have you heard anything more from Sir Joshua ? When is he coming down to see me ? "

" He is very busy in the City at present, I'm afraid ; but of course he will come as soon as he possibly can. Were you pining for the society of the eminent Sir Joshua ? "

" I should like to see him very much indeed," she answered in a low voice.

" About anything in particular ? "

She hesitated, and then suddenly looked up into his face her candid eyes sorrowful and anxious.

"I am wondering all the time what has become of Philip."

Mr. Mason had to turn his back and poke up the fire, lest his eye should proclaim his feelings too patently.

"I shouldn't bother about him if I were you," he said shortly.

"Why not?" she asked, and there was a note in her voice that brought Annette's warning sharply to his mind, "You must walk very careful!"

He turned round again and faced her with a calm, considerate air.

"I only mean that a man who doesn't appreciate you sufficiently, Beatrix, to meet you at the station when he promised to, and who makes no effort to find you or correspond with you—well, as I say, I wouldn't worry about him if I were a girl with any spirit."

"But I am sure there must have been some mistake!" she cried.

"What mistake is possible?"

"He might have met with some accident."

He shook his head sceptically.

"You'd have heard of it before now."

She was thoughtful for a moment.

"Yes," she admitted, "surely Charles Toothill would have told me something, even if Philip himself couldn't write."

"Of course, naturally!"

"And yet . . ."

He waited for her to finish, but she added nothing more, and then at last he ventured to say:

"I am trying to—well, to be as good a friend as I can, instead, Beatrix."

She rewarded him with a quick smile, and his eye made a much more satisfied comment this time. And then suddenly she said:

"I wish, Cousin Harry, you would do something for me!"

"Anything you like, my dear little Beatrix," he said with affectionate gallantry.

"Will you really? Then find out what has become of Philip! Go and see him and tell him—tell him I want to know what has happened, why he didn't meet me, why he hasn't written—I want to know everything, even the worst! Will you?"

"D—n the fire!" muttered Mr. Mason. He had turned his back in the middle of this speech, and was stabbing viciously with the poker. One might have thought some hated enemy were among the coals. "It doesn't seem to draw to-night!"

He turned again at last and met her eyes, and his own tried to look sympathetic.

"Er—you want me to try and find out something, do you?"

"Do you object very much?" she asked.

"Why do you think I should?"

"From your manner. You aren't prejudiced against Philip, are you?"

"Prejudiced?" He forced a laugh. "Well, to tell you the truth, considering how he has treated you, I can hardly be expected to feel very affectionate. You are worth the very best man that ever lived, Beatrix!"

He had thrown more warmth into his voice than he had ventured to use yet, and he saw her give a slight start and look at him for a moment doubtfully. He faced her and risked still more.

"I mean it!" he said urgently.

"I only want Philip," she said simply.

"You deserve a better man than that!" said he.

The next instant she was on her feet.

"I won't hear you say such things! You *are* prejudiced, Cousin Harry. I am going to bed now. Good night."

"Beatrix!" he exclaimed, and tried to stop her; but she shook his hand off her shoulder.

"I'm sorry I offended you," he said. "I

didn't mean to. If I can find out anything about this fellow . . . "

"He isn't a fellow!" she cried, and was gone from the room.

Mr. Mason was then able to relieve his feelings.

* * * * *

He was in his library next morning when Annette came in, a telegram in her hand.

"For you, sir," she said.

"Why are you bringing it ?" he demanded. "How did you get hold of it ?"

Suspicion was in his eye, but she merely smiled.

"I was waiting for it to come, and so I ran out to meet the boy," said she. "This is the telegram you expected ; Yes ? What does it say ? Is it all safe again ?"

He read the slip of paper with an expressionless face, and then crumpled it up in his hand.

"All right ; quite safe again," he answered. "But don't you go intercepting any more of my wires, Annette !"

"Oh, it will not be necessary again !" she smiled. "But it was better I should this time. Now I am relieved."

She went out, and for a minute he watched the door intently, as if suspecting it might

open suddenly again. Then he smoothed out the telegram and re-read it carefully.

"*Regret to say Essington still at large. No information at all yet.*—JENKINSON."

"This is the very devil!" he muttered.

PART III

CHAPTER I

At the Red Lion

Just about the very time when Mr. Davidson, disguised in an ill-fitting clerical habit and secreted from observation within a covered wain, had reached his school and begun to compose a telegram to the nearest police office, his own clothes had arrived at the outskirts of a certain market town, and the gentleman inside them was studying a sign-post with considerable concern.

"I'm dashed if it isn't Kenton!" he said to himself. "The very place I tried to turn them off to! How extraordinarily careless of me."

He now began to regret the acuteness which had prompted him to fling his bicycle over a hedge half a mile back, on the theory that all law-abiding inhabitants of the district would shortly be warned (if, indeed, they had not been already) to look out for and arrest an individual riding such a machine. For a moment he was even tempted to walk

back and recover it. But after debating the question for a few seconds in his rapid way, hunger and the spirit of sport prevailed.

"I must have some lunch," he said to himself. "And besides, this is essentially a pleasure trip and I hate bicycling."

Being a confirmed optimist, it also struck him as improbable that his pursuers would have stopped at the wayside shop and picked up the Kenton clue. And in any case he declined to believe that they could have arrived here already; so, dismissing worry from his mind, he continued his walk into the town.

In a few minutes he was passing between rows of neat little villas with rose bushes and pet trees grouped round them, and then came the usual wide, somnolent street of a typical country town, with a few ancient houses and a few new, and the rest of a ripe, elderly middle age. There were not many people about, and none of them suggested romance, and Mr. Essington was about to apply his mind to the serious business of luncheon, when he spied on the opposite pavement a small man, who caught his attention owing to the mere fact that he was doing nothing at all. With his hands in his pockets and a somewhat abstracted air, this individual stood by the kerb, some-

times staring across the street from under the brim of a large bowler hat, and sometimes looking over his shoulder at people who passed on his own side.

"The very same man!" he said to himself. "Then he *has* got here already, after all! Well, there's nothing for it now but trusting to luck. If he got a good look at me out of that window, I'm done. Otherwise, he'll be."

The man's eyes rested for a moment on the leisurely looking individual in ill-fitting clothes strolling along the opposite pavement and then passed on to some one else, without a flicker of recognition, or even of curiosity.

"He doesn't know me!" thought the leisurely individual, "and he doesn't know yet I've changed my clothes! Under those circumstances, the soundest thing to do is obviously to keep on his track, see where he goes, and then go in the opposite direction."

His walk fell to a saunter, and then he paused opposite a tobacconist's window, but as luck would have it, he had not to pause for long. In a minute or two the man took his hands out of his pockets and set off at an easy walk down the street, while Mr. Essington strolled nonchalantly on the other side. When he had reached a large signboard with the picture of an ambiguous looking quadruped, and the legend "Ye Red Lion,"

the man stopped, looked up at the signboard, and in at the door beneath it, and then entered this hostelry.

Mr. Essington glanced down at Mr. Davidson's commodious waistcoat and the bags in the knees of his scholastic trousers, and came to the correct conclusion that they had so completely effaced all traces of the man of fashion as to justify him in attempting to pass himself off as a mere member of the general public. Accordingly he crossed the street, entered the Red Lion likewise, and discovered the bar with no difficulty. There stood the small man munching a biscuit, with his tankard already half empty.

Mr. Essington took up his position at a little distance down the bar, caught the eye of a prosperous looking person behind it, and in a voice and manner nicely calculated to match his unfashionable attire, gave his order.

" Pint o' beer, if you please, and one dozen ham sandwiches. If cut already, bring 'em all together. If not, I'll eat 'em as you cut 'em, and if you're a betting man, I'll lay you a tanner I'll eat faster than you cut."

The publican evidently recognised a kindred spirit in this offer, and shedding his guest a genial smile, went off for the sandwiches, while Mr. Essington leaned gracefully on

one elbow with his back to the man in the bowler, and listened to the conversation behind him.

The small man had fallen into talk with a couple of local patrons of the Red Lion, and in a moment Mr. Essington caught the words, spoken in a guarded tone :

" A clergyman ; at least dressed like a clergyman any'ow."

" Clergyman ! " repeated one of the others. " Young man or old ? "

" Youngish man ; tallish figure ; fair-'aired ; clean-shaved . . ."

At this point the first sandwich arrived and Mr. Essington lost the rest of the sentence, but he had heard enough to make him wonder very seriously whether the other eleven were quite worth waiting for. The first, however, was so excellent, with just exactly the amount of mustard he liked, that he decided to regard the situation as optimistically as possible, and eat the others too. At the same time, as he consumed them one by one, hearing further snatches of personal description and directions to report any such person immediately to the speaker if possible, or, if not, to the police, he began to devote his mind rather urgently to the question of where to turn next. Nothing very definite had suggested itself (unless one were to count a

fleeting thought of engaging a room at the Red Lion under the name of Sarasate and going to bed for a week to rest his elbow, which he dismissed instantly as being no doubt quite feasible but too dull), when the prosperous person appeared with the last three sandwiches and genially claimed his tanner.

Mr. Essington's friendly nature was never averse from conversation with anyone, and as his host had evidently taken a fancy to him at first sight, they were very soon on excellent terms. Yet even in the midst of their jocularities, the late Mr. Pytcher could not help feeling a trace of disquietude now and then. The other eyed him at moments with a glance that seemed to him to suggest either a suspicion of his clerical past or some thought he was quite unable to fathom, and when a gentleman is standing in purloined clothes within a few feet of an agent specially detailed for his arrest, he is apt to become sensitive in the matter of unfathomable glances. The one satisfactory feature was that his host took no notice at all of the man in the bowler.

"I don't believe they are working together, anyhow," the adventurer said to himself, "but I wish I knew what my new friend found so interesting in my appearance."

All at once his host leant over the counter and lowered his voice confidentially.

" I think I can 'ardly make a mistake," he said. " You've bin in the same profession as I was, eh ? "

" Meaning the public line ? " inquired Mr. Essington, tactfully adopting the same confidential air.

The landlord shook his head, and still more confidentially announced :

" I *was* a butler."

" Oh ! " said Mr. Essington. " By Jingo, were you ? And so you've spotted me as—er——"

" Genelman's servant, 'all-marked all over you. I knew you was something classy from the start."

" Now, how the deuce could you guess that ? " exclaimed his guest with every appearance of admiring surprise.

" Those clothes wasn't cut just exactly special to your order, if you'll pardon my saying so," smiled the landlord. " ' Cast-offs ! ' I says to myself as soon as ever I saw 'em. And then 'earing your refined manner of speaking—' What the deuce ! ' and all that—I didn't need any more tips to tell what you was."

" I wish I could see through people as quick as that ! " sighed Mr. Essington.

These frank tributes to his acumen were evidently raising his guest higher every moment in the landlord's estimation. At this point he felt, in fact, impelled to reveal his own appreciation of the amiable gentleman in cast-offs.

"If you will allow me to say so," said he, "I took a fancy to you from my first squint at you in the paddock, in a manner of speaking; and seeing your form on the course, so to speak, I'd double the odds! That's why I'm going to put a delicate question, as I wouldn't put to a genelman I 'adn't took such a fancy to." He leant still further forward and breathed huskily, "Out of a job?"

"Right again, by Jingo!" said his guest.

"*I* thought so!" said the landlord knowingly. "And wanting another, eh?"

"Devilish badly."

The landlord beamed on him beneficently.

"May I inquire your name?" he asked.

"Parker," said his guest without a trace of hesitation, adding to himself, "I'll keep to the P's this time."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Parker," said the landlord cordially. "My name's Rumbury."

"Glad to know *you*, Mr. Rumbury," replied Mr. Parker.

Mr. Rumbury raised the flap in the counter.

"Step inside, Mr. Parker," said he. "A

little conversation might be rather pleasant for us both—and we won't 'ave it dry neither ! "

As Mr. Parker stepped inside he threw one swift glance over his shoulder. The man in the bowler was very deep in converse with a small group of fellow guests.

" You can't miss the man if you sees 'im," he was saying, " clergyman's clothes, fair-'aired . . ."

But at this point Mr. Parker passed out of hearing.

CHAPTER II

Mr. Rumbury's Proposal

Mr. Parker found himself seated in a very snug little bar-parlour, with a very cheerful fire, a very stiff glass of grog at his elbow, and a very long cigar in his mouth. There could be no doubt about it that Mr. Rumbury was an ideal host. He seemed, indeed, ready to provide absolutely anything his new friend expressed a taste for.

"This is leading towards *something*," said Mr. Parker shrewdly to himself.

"Now then that we're sitting 'ere snug and comfortable, pleasure 'aving come first, so far as I'm able to provide it, Mr. Parker——"

"Deuced pleasant too!" said Mr. Parker with genuine enthusiasm, resolving at the same time to reward his host by a selection of the phrases that seemed to impress him most favourably. "Quite deuced, I assure you!"

"Very glad and proud as 'ow you're 'appy, Mr. Parker. And now we comes to business. You've probably 'eard of Lord Poppleham?"

"Yes," said Mr. Parker, "I believe he belongs to . . ." he was going to say "my club," but remembered his servile position just in time and altered it into "to the circles I've been in the habit of moving in, Mr. Rumbury; in a manner of speaking, you understand."

"I understands perfectly, Mr. Parker, and very classily put too. I could see you'd moved among the aristocracy. Ever come across 'is lordship personally?"

"No," said Mr. Parker truthfully, "we haven't met."

"Their place is just ten miles out from 'ere," continued Mr. Rumbury, "and, as a matter of fact, I was butler to 'is father, the late Lord Poppleham. I've kep' up my connection with the fam'ly very intimate ever since I left 'em. Very great friends indeed we are, I may venture to say."

"I can well believe it, Mr. Rumbury."

Mr. Rumbury smiled modestly at the compliment and then fell grave again. Indeed, it was becoming apparent that some matter of considerable importance weighed upon his mind.

"They turns to me in all manner o' things. It would quite surprise you what I'm trusted with by the fam'ly sometimes. Chiefly it's with getting 'em servants. They knows I'm

a good judge o' character and 'as a wide connection in that sort of way, and so they *trusts* me, Mr. Parker."

"Deuced sensible of 'em!" said Mr. Parker.

"And now," continued Mr. Rumbury with increasing solemnity, "now 'is lordship says I've let 'im down!"

"Oh, dash it!" cried his guest. "That's really devilish uncivil of him."

Mr. Rumbury shook his head gravely.

"There's something in it, 'owever, I'm afraid. In fact, there's no doubt I *did* promise 'is lordship to find 'im a valet, but what with business being rather active lately, and one thing and another, it clean slipped out of my 'ead. And 'ere's 'is lordship just come down yesterday and sends word to know where's the man I promised to get 'im!" Mr. Rumbury looked fixedly at his guest and in very impressive accents concluded, "And 'ere you walks into my bar, the very picture of the valet 'e wants!"

Mr. Parker returned his gaze.

"What's his age?" he asked.

"Young genelman—or I should say, young nobleman—of, let me see, twenty-eight."

"I like 'em young," murmured Mr. Parker, and from a certain reminiscent look in his eye it seemed possible that he was thinking

of the Rev. Crispin Pytcher. "Wise or foolish?"

"Wise or foolish?" repeated Mr. Rumbury, opening his eyes, as though he had never before heard such curious expressions applied to a nobleman. "Well, between ourselves, he ain't per'aps what one calls extra sharp; not like 'is late father by no means! 'Is late lordship—this is *strictly* between ourselves, Mr. Parker—used to call 'im the damndest fool 'e'd ever met. But of course he's now a nobleman 'imself, and it don't do to be too critical."

"No," agreed Mr. Parker, "it don't." And in fact he himself seemed to be entirely satisfied with his host's description of the present Lord Poppleham. "Everything sounds very nice so far," he went on with the same thoughtful smile. "There's only one point more. Would his clothes fit me?"

The ex-butler looked him up and down.

"As cast-offs goes, I may venture to say they'd quite become you."

Mr. Parker sprang up with an animated air.

"Lead me to it!" said he.

Mr. Rumbury seemed almost more startled than pleased.

"You mean you accepts the job—right off—no more inquiries?"

"None," said Mr. Parker firmly. "It's exactly the job I've been looking for."

"I think it's only right to tell you, Mr. Parker, that 'is lordship don't give exactly *fancy* wages——"

"Oh, I'll get my money's worth out of him. No fear of that," said Mr. Parker easily. "Let's have another drink on the strength of it, Mr. Rumbury!"

Mr. Rumbury refilled their glasses with a somewhat thoughtful air. Then he planted his rotund figure before the fire, and after a preliminary cough to indicate that he was now going to tread on delicate ground, began:

"I needn't tell you 'ow pleased I am, Mr. Parker, to find you so agreeable to take the situation, nor 'ow relieved, in a manner of speaking, not to 'ave let 'is lordship down. At the same time—well—ahem!—I'd 'ave to feel that there was something in the nature of references."

"Certainly," agreed Mr. Parker, "what would you like? A wire to the Archbishop with a prepaid reply would settle the business in a moment. Only—deuce take it! his lordship probably hasn't much use for archbishops. Or if you like to drop a line to his Royal Highness—but no, he's still at Homburg! Or—er—well, the fact is really, Mr.

Rumbury, it's so devilish difficult to pick and choose ! "

Mr. Rumbury endeavoured to maintain a business-like manner, but it was quite manifest that these glimpses of Mr. Parker's past situations and Mr. Parker's dashing air as he rattled them off, had entirely dazzled the worthy landlord.

" I *ought* to 'ave something on paper——" he began.

Mr. Parker clapped him jovially on the back.

" Paper be damned ! " said he. " Cannot one gentleman trust another gentleman ? Leave me to settle references with his lordship. Another drink, Rumbury, to show we're all sportsmen ! Deuce take it ! Dash it, old fellow ! By the way, when does Poppleham want me ? "

" Soon as possible. 'E's starting off to pay visits immediately."

" Finish your drink and get me a cab ! " commanded Mr. Parker. Mr. Rumbury felt that if his lordship were not grateful to him for securing this treasure, then human nature must be black indeed.

CHAPTER III

Lord Poppleham's Valet

In the course of the afternoon Lord Poppleham was informed that the valet engaged for his lordship by Mr. Rumbury of the Red Lion had now arrived and awaited his lordship's pleasure.

"Show the fellow in here," commanded his lordship.

Having recently suffered severely at the hands of a fellow nobleman who specialised in snooker pool, it had occurred to his lordship that before resuming his round of visits it might be profitable to spend some of his leisure time in quietly potting the red. He had already spent most of the morning in the seclusion of his billiard-room, and having pulled himself together by a bottle of champagne at luncheon and a nap in his easy chair afterwards, he was now practising conscientiously once more. As he bent over his cue he heard the door open behind him.

"Don't move till I've played my shot!"

he commanded, and then after a few seconds strained silence the red missed the pocket by two inches.

"Tut, tut, my lord!" said a cultivated voice behind him.

His lordship turned with a start and perceived a tall, agreeable looking person, dressed in a remarkably ill-fitting suit. On his side, this person saw a weedy looking young man with a scrap of carefully tended moustache, a chin that seemed to be seeking refuge behind his collar, and an eyeglass which its owner had a little difficulty in adjusting securely in his eye. When he had achieved this, he stared through it at his new valet very hard indeed.

"Hi! Er—what are you doing?" he demanded.

The new valet was already taking down a cue from the rack, and now with a very pleasant smile he inquired:

"Would your lordship prefer a few lessons or a game of 100 up? Personally, I should recommend the lessons." And with that he placed the red and white balls in position and added, "Now, my lord, let me see you try to sink the red pill."

My lord continued to stare.

"Er—what's your name?" he demanded.

"Parker, my lord; spelt with a P."

"Oh!" said his lordship. "That's—er—the usual way to spell it, isn't it?"

"Right, my lord, quite right!" said Mr. Parker with an air of cordial approval. "And I may add that if on any other occasion your lordship should ever happen to be correct, I shall have no hesitation in telling you so."

Still his lordship stared.

"Look here," he said with some severity, "I don't know what you're driving at."

"You will learn, my lord," said Mr. Parker indulgently, "when we have got to know one another a little better. In the meantime, if you will allow me, I shall show you how that red ball ought to be put down."

And thereupon he stepped up to the table, bent over it for a moment, and the red disappeared. "Now," he continued, "we shall try a slightly more difficult angle," and down went the red again.

There could be no doubt that though his emotions still seemed mixed, Lord Poppleham was beginning to be impressed.

"I say," he was condescending enough to remark, "you seem to be rather useful at this game."

"Well," suggested Mr. Parker, "suppose you take 50 in a 100 and I'll give you a few tips as we go along?"

"I—er—don't usually play billiards with

my valet," his lordship explained with dignity.

"It will make it all the pleasanter, my lord, when you do get the chance. I'll take spot and start with a miss in balk. Now, my lord, see if you can bring off a cannon. Try it like this," and with the point of his cue Mr. Parker indicated the cushions to be used.

His lordship made no further struggle, but murmuring something about being damned if he saw yet how else Parker could have been spelt, he submissively attempted the cannon, and failed. His opponent, however, proved as obliging as he was efficient. He made him play the stroke over again, and yet again, till at the fifth attempt he brought it off.

"By Jove, you know," his lordship admitted, "I believe this really will improve my billiards."

"I thought I would begin with your lordship's billiards," smiled Mr. Parker, "and then we can gradually work through various other little matters requiring correction. I need hardly trouble your lordship to change your tie at this moment, but it will have to come next."

"My tie!" exclaimed his lordship, "what's the matter with it?"

"It is what his Grace would have called a little commercial looking," explained Mr. Parker, pausing for one instant between his shots and then going in off the red. "Three more; that's fifteen"; he played again "and five makes twenty. Would your lordship mind spotting the red for me?"

His lordship by this time was in a state of mind that precluded any further possibility of resistance. He spotted the red, then picked Mr. Parker's ball out of the pocket and presently spotted the red again.

"Thirty-two," murmured Mr. Parker, "and a very nice game opening up."

"I say," said his lordship, recovering his speech at last. "You—er—mentioned his Grace——"

"On purpose," said Mr. Parker. "Thirty-nine. You will find my ball in the top pocket, my lord. Thank you."

"On purpose," repeated my lord, "er—what d'ye mean?"

"I wished your lordship to realise the kind of society I have been accustomed to move in."

"Which duke was it?"

Mr. Parker looked up from his shot with a significant smile.

"The duchess was my particular friend," said he—"His Grace took a somewhat extreme view of the incident, we had a few

words, and it was thought best for all parties that I should leave. But your lordship will quite understand that it is better to mention no names." He bent down again and played his shot. "Forty-five—and the white's down! Dash it! Forty-seven. I think I had better leave your lordship a double balk. Now, my lord, see what you can make of this leave."

His lordship made nothing of it, and was commanded to try the shot over again. Ten minutes later Mr. Parker ran out with an unfinished break of thirty-one and returned his cue to the rack.

"I have enjoyed my game very much," he was good enough to say, "and I have no doubt your lordship has picked up a number of hints."

"I didn't have the chance of playing many shots," said his lordship with a somewhat aggrieved air.

"You saw me playing, my lord, and personally I should have thought it was more amusing to watch good billiards than play bad."

My lord's eyes were following Mr. Parker's next movements with a fascinated stare. Suddenly he gave a convulsive start and a stifled exclamation. His new valet had taken a case from his pocket and was lighting a cigar.

"Had your lordship any particular remark to make?" he inquired, pausing with the match in his hand.

"No—er—only——" his lordship began.

"In that case," interposed Mr. Parker (but with perfect politeness), as he threw the match into the fire, "we had perhaps better adjourn to your lordship's dressing-room. I think I should do your lordship more credit if I changed my clothes."

His lordship entirely agreed with this opinion, though why it should be coupled with a desire to visit his dressing-room he was unable to see. But being pardonably proud of his wardrobe he made no demur about setting out on a visit of inspection, and he felt considerably gratified by Mr. Parker's outspoken approval of what he saw.

"You can leave me, now, my lord," he said, "I feel sure I can make myself perfectly at home."

Lord Poppleham's next attempt to have an interview with his valet was a failure. He rang for him when he went up to dress for dinner, but was informed that Mr. Parker had gone out, and happening at that moment to glance out of his window he caught a glimpse of two people wandering into the shrubberies in the gathering dusk. One of these he recognised as quite his prettiest

housemaid ; the other struck him as looking extremely like his new valet, only very markedly better dressed.

"I say, 'pon my word! I'm dashed!" muttered his lordship.

Dinner, however, cheered him up considerably, for having inherited an excellent cellar, he would have considered himself ungrateful to his ancestors had he not taken advantage of it. But after a cigar and an effort to emulate Mr. Parker's skill on the billiard table, he began to feel a little bored. An unfortunate oversight in making his autumn arrangements had left this gap of forty-eight hours between visits, and his lordship had scarcely ever been left alone before in his life. He decided to summon his valet and impart a few instructions.

"And I really must tell the fellow to remember his position and all that sort of thing a little better," he said to himself.

This time he was relieved to find that Mr. Parker was at liberty to attend, but when Mr. Parker entered the billiard-room, his appearance was so surprising that his master had some difficulty in recovering his eyeglass. Instead of the pleasant-looking, but ill-clad person of the afternoon, he beheld an extremely fashionable and even distinguished gentleman. And to add to his

lordship's bewilderment, his well-cut suit was an exact replica of his own latest creation.

"I say!" he exclaimed, "Er—where did you get that suit o' clothes?"

"Anything the matter with it, my lord?" asked Mr. Parker amiably.

"It's exactly like my own!"

"As a matter of fact, it was your own, my lord."

This time Lord Poppleham groped for his eyeglass in vain.

"D'you mean to say you've gone and helped yourself to my best suit!"

Mr. Parker shook his head at him with some severity.

"My lord, my lord! Really this spirit is unworthy of your lordship. If I am to pay you the same little attentions I paid his Grace, you must cultivate a trifle more of the aristocratic spirit that distinguished the duke. I assure you I shall only select articles from your lordship's wardrobe with the greatest discrimination. I rejected fully two-thirds of your ties, and your boots unfortunately don't fit."

His lordship was visibly moved by this rebuke and the firm yet kindly tone in which it was administered. He made one more protest, but it was only half-hearted.

"I don't want to be stingy, of course; but, dash it, Parker, I've hardly worn that suit!"

"So I surmised," replied Mr. Parker in a tone that precluded any further argument on the point. "By the way, any other matters to discuss, my lord? I don't want to hurry your lordship, but I happen to have a lady waiting for me."

"Yes," said his lordship, "I wanted to tell you I'm going to pay a visit to-morrow and taking you with me of course."

"A visit?" repeated Mr. Parker thoughtfully. "May I ask the name of the people we stay with?"

"Jones."

"Jones? Well, I believe there are a few quite respectable families of that name; but not many, I should imagine, in our circle, my lord. Which Joneses?"

By this time his lordship had evidently become a little nervous lest this paragon should form an unfavourable opinion of his position in the world of fashion.

"Oh, only some beastly thing in the City," he explained apologetically. "Dashed if I remember how I got to know 'em. But they've got a deuced nice place though; Hiddlecombe Hall it's called—used to be Lord Darminter's place."

"Don't know them," said Mr. Parker to himself. "It'll be quite safe to go."

Aloud he replied with an obliging though somewhat condescending air.

"I shall be charmed to accompany you, my lord. Of course, as a rule I shouldn't encourage your lordship to patronise the *nouveaux riches*, but the girls are often quite pretty, the port is generally sound, and one needn't know them in town. Anyhow we'll make the best of it. When do we start?"

"Time to get there for dinner. There's a train about six o'clock that ought to do. Oh, by the way, I'm taking another gentleman down with me, Lord Clarence Tuttebury."

Mr. Parker seemed to prick up his ears.

"Known to his friends as 'Curly,' my lord?"

"That's the fellow," said his lordship, who by this time was condescending to treat the accomplished and fashionable Mr. Parker with considerable familiarity. "Have you ever come across him—er—I mean ever seen him?"

"Now, have I?" said Mr. Parker to himself. "I'm hanged if I'm quite sure. It's a trifle risky."

Aloud he replied in his easiest manner:

"I have always moved in extremely exclusive circles, my lord, but if he goes about much we have probably stayed in the same houses occasionally. I presume his

lordship's visits are not confined to persons of the name of Jones ? "

It was apparent that Mr. Parker had very swiftly divined exactly how to handle his noble employer. His air of kindly, patronising insolence was having the happiest results. By this time Lord Poppleham seemed incapable of resenting anything.

" Oh, but Lord Clarence doesn't even know these people," he hastened to explain. " Never met one of the whole dashed crowd before ! I'm simply taking him down with me, so as—er—well, to make sure that there's one other gentleman in the place. We neither of us go to such places as a rule ! "

Mr. Parker received this apology with a condescending smile.

" I am relieved to hear it, my lord," said he. " Under those circumstances your combined lordships will make a very harmless ornament. In fact, I have really no further objections to the visit. Good night, my lord."

Mr. Parker's back view, presented to his lordship as he strolled to the door, was graceful negligence itself, but his face was thoughtful.

" Do I know Curly ? " he said to himself, " I'm dashed if I can remember ! There are awkward possibilities in the situation ! "

CHAPTER IV

A Country House Visit

Next morning immediately after breakfast Mr. Parker presented himself before his lordship, made a brief but courteous apology for the slight indisposition which had kept him in bed till nine o'clock and prevented his supervising Lord Poppleham's *toilet*, and then proceeded to outline his plans for the day.

"It has occurred to me, my lord," said he, "that you would probably be very pleased to follow the procedure adopted by his Grace and myself when we paid our country house visits. His Grace used invariably to dispatch me by a train ahead of him, so that I could prepare his apartments, create the necessary ducal atmosphere in the house, and subsequently meet him at the station and give him, as it were, a sensation of increased dignity by being thus received by his own retainer on his arrival."

"Oh—er—well—" began Lord Poppleham,

who took in new ideas somewhat gradually.

"I thought you would approve," said Mr. Parker promptly, "and I assure you that the more experience of the system you obtain, the more you will be struck with its advantages. Lord Clarence, of course, will be bringing his own man?"

"Oh, of course!"

"He will be able, then, to purchase your tickets for you, choose your travelling literature, and see that you leave the train at the proper station."

The thorough system of valeting implied by these attentions, greatly impressed Lord Poppleham.

"Yes," he admitted, "I dare say he will be able to look after us; though of course we can do—er—most of these things for ourselves."

Mr. Parker seemed a little surprised, but on the whole appeared to be relieved.

"Really?" said he. "Well, I dare say a little independence is permissible now and then; but I must very seriously warn your lordship against overdoing it. However, I shall take you in hand as soon as you alight from the train. This should not be done, by the way, while it is still in motion. I shall now do your lordship's packing, send off a wire

to tell Mr. Jones to expect me, and take the 12.5 train."

His lordship was given no further opportunity of discussing the matter, for Mr. Parker walked off promptly to carry out his plans. So judicious did they seem that though Lord Poppleham was a trifle disconcerted at the rapidity with which his mind was made up for him, he very soon decided that Parker was really an extraordinarily capable fellow. He was a little surprised to learn after the paragon's departure that as a matter of fact Mr. Parker had employed his lordship's footman to do the packing while he himself was apparently engaged in bidding farewell to the lady of his fancy; and this even suggested the curious reflection that the new valet had so far not done a single hand's turn of valeting since he entered the house. Lord Poppleham decided that, invaluable though Parker was clearly going to prove, he really must have a serious word with the fellow one day very soon.

In the course of the afternoon Lord Clarence Tuttebury, a short, cheerful, and boyish young man, with neatly-curled fair hair, attended by a discreet-looking gentleman in side whiskers, arrived at Lord Poppleham's seat, and the two young

noblemen gave one another an affectionate greeting.

"Hullo, Pop!" cried Lord Clarence. "Lookin' as usual as though you'd just been backin' the wrong horse! How are you?"

"Hullo, yourself, Curly!" said Lord Poppleham. "Matter of fact, I actually have been this time. How are you?"

"So full of beans, they're positively droppin' out!"

"Brave fellow! What about a drink?"

After several whiskies and sodas and a couple of games of billiards, the two friends set out for the station.

"Notice any improvement in my billiards?" inquired Lord Poppleham.

"Not much," said Lord Clarence candidly. "Why?"

"I had a lesson yesterday, Curly."

"Well, you certainly didn't cut the cloth," admitted Curly. "Who's been teachin' you?"

"I've got the most wonderful new valet, Curly—positively the most extraordinary fellow you ever saw! He's as good as a pro. at billiards; in fact, first class at everything!"

"At what other things?" asked his friend.

"Oh—er—at all sorts of things. Just you wait till you see the fellow!"

His lordship felt a little annoyed at the difficulty of thinking of the specific feats in which Mr. Parker excelled. There could be no doubt that the fellow really was most extraordinary, and for a considerable portion of their journey he expatiated on his merits. In fact, he was still enlarging on the subject when the train arrived at their destination.

"Ah, here we are; and now you'll see him waiting for us on the platform," said he. "Have a damned good look at the fellow, Curly."

Curly descended after him and looked up and down the platform.

"Where is he, Pop?" he inquired.

Lord Poppleham had screwed his eyeglass into his eye and was looking very hard in all directions.

"Devilish funny thing," he observed. "He doesn't seem to be here yet!"

"Nobody else to meet us?"

"Don't seem to be, anyway. They must still be on the road."

"Devilish slack of 'em," remarked Lord Clarence.

"Devilish," agreed Lord Poppleham. "However, they are sure to be here in a minute."

The train moved off again, the other

passengers left the station, and still the noble pair were left standing beside Lord Clarence's luggage on the deserted platform. His own man had been to the entrance once or twice to make inquiries, but there was no sign at all of any conveyance from Hiddlecombe Hall; and now he seemed to be trying to extract information from a porter.

"Deuced careless of Jones," said Lord Poppleham. "I'm dashed if I don't feel inclined never to come and stop with the fellow again!"

At that moment Lord Clarence's valet left the porter and approached the distinguished couple with an odd expression on his discreet countenance. In his hand he was holding a slip of paper.

"Any sign of anyone, Dobson?" asked his master.

"No, my lord," said Dobson, "and I'm very much afraid there isn't likely to be either. They've just been telling me that Lord Clarence Tuttebury arrived this morning."

"Me?" cried Curly.

"Some one who said he was you, my lord." He held out the slip of paper, and added, "He gave this telegram to the porter to send off for him. The porter says he didn't send it because he felt suspicious of something,

but I expect he simply forgot to. Anyhow, it luckily wasn't sent."

The two friends studied the telegraph form with horrified attention. On it was this message addressed to Lord Poppleham :

"*Infectious illness in house. Regret must postpone your visit to us.* JONES."

"Then—er—d'ye mean to say that Mr. Jones . . ." began Lord Poppleham.

But his friend had begun to grasp the situation.

"What was the fellow like who wrote this wire ?" he demanded.

"The porter says he was a tall, fair gentleman, my lord, wearing a light brown suit and accompanied by three articles of luggage ; new leather portmanteau, new leather suit case . . ."

"My God !" cried the unfortunate peer, "that's my luggage ! It—it must have been Parker !"

"And—and he had the impudence to describe himself as *me* ?" exclaimed Lord Clarence, swelling with justifiable indignation. "I say, Pop, this is—er—too damned much of a good thing ! I don't object to your gettin' a fellow to teach you billiards, but when it comes to impersonatin' *me*, damn it, Pop, I draw the line !"

"It—er—was probably only—er—some

dashed silly joke," said Pop feebly "He—er—is—er—a deuced rum sort of fellow."

"Begging your lordships' pardon," said Dobson, "but it seems to me this here Parker is nothing more or less than a swell burglar. After Mr. Jones's plate, that's *his* game!"

The noble pair were thunderstruck.

"A burglar!" cried Lord Poppleham. "By Gad, d'ye mean to say I was playing billiards at my own house with a burglar! Damn it, Curly, I'm damned if I'm not—er—positively damned!"

"Dear old fellow, I must say candidly I thought he sounded a bit too good to be true," said his friend. "But a burglar! And pretendin' he was me! I say, Pop, what shall we do?"

"Er—exactly, you've hit the dashed nail on the head, Curly. What shall we?"

The discreet-looking Mr. Dobson again ventured to make a suggestion.

"Supposing, my lord, you was to inform the police?"

"That's it!" exclaimed their lordships. "The very thing!"

"And then, my lord, seeing as how this Parker is probably counting on his wire being sent off and won't be expecting to be disturbed, we'll probably nail him in Mr. Jones's house. He won't likely venture to make off

with the plate, not till after the family is in bed."

Their lordships' spirits began to rise.

"Run him to earth and dig him out, Pop; what?" cried Curly. "I say, that's an idea!"

"First class!" cried Pop. "I say, Dobson, where can we find a bobby in this place?"

The intelligent Dobson sped to the station master's office and in a moment that official had come to assist their councils. It seemed that the nearest town boasting of a police office was three miles from the station and there were no conveyances available. So the luggage was left in charge of the station master and the three set forth in the gathering dusk to walk to the town and prepare the net for Mr. Parker.

CHAPTER V

AT NIGHT

IT was approaching midnight when a wagonette containing the sergeant of police and a large and muscular constable, stopped at the Royal Hotel to pick up their lordships and Mr. Dobson. When they reached the town, the two friends had found the police force absent on another job, and at first the delay had chafed their ardent spirits sorely; then, however, a little dinner at the Royal Hotel had been suggested by Mr. Dobson, and a very tolerable Burgundy and excellent sloe gin had brought consolation. In fact, the wagonette had to wait till midnight had come and gone before their lordships emerged, cheered and even inclined to be musical.

"Cheer-oh, bobby!" cried the genial Curly as he seated himself somewhat suddenly and heavily beside the sergeant. "'For you're a jolly good fellow! which nobody can . . .' Where the devil's Pop? Oh, there you are, you old blighter. Thought you were another

of these dashed bobbies. Damned good fellows all the same! 'Which nobody can deny!' I say, my cigar's gone out. Who's got a match?"

The task of relighting his cigar occupied Lord Clarence for the first two miles. He warbled snatches of several ditties during pauses in the operation, and then, by the time it was successfully accomplished, dropped off somewhat suddenly to sleep. His friend for a space was equally musical, but continued wakeful. In fact, as mile followed mile, the chill of the night air and the monotonous progress between dark hedgerows under a dim, lightly-clouded sickle of moon, merely converted him from a condition of wakeful cheeriness to wakeful irritation. At ever-diminishing intervals he remarked to the sergeant:

"This is a damned long drive, constable!"

"Getting shorter all the time, my lord," said the sergeant on every occasion.

"I call it damned long," replied his lordship with equal regularity, and then he would invariably add, "Wait till I get hold of that fellow Parker!"

They had been going for well over an hour, and it was now after half-past one, when they passed through the lodge gates of

Hiddlecombe Hall, and plunged into the profound darkness of a winding avenue over-arched by monumental elms. Then at last came a wide gravel sweep and the long, unlighted front of a country house.

"Now, my lords," said the sergeant, "the less noise we makes the better. We don't want to give no alarm to the fellow."

He had rung the bell, and the five were all waiting on the door-step. Lord Poppleham, though a trifle cheered by his arrival, was already beginning to be carried away again by his righteous indignation.

"Alarm be damned! We've got to get inside this dashed house and wring the fellow's neck!" said he. "Pull that bell again, bobby!"

At the third peal, the front door at last opened and revealed a touzle-haired young man with his trousers hurriedly pulled over his night-shirt. Behind him a single electric light had been switched on, and they could see a large, shadowy hall, with a wide staircase ascending into darkness on the further side, and two gigantic mail-clad figures in the foreground apparently guarding the portals. Into this half-lit cavern Lord Poppleham instantly plunged, elbowing aside the sergeant, and announcing with truculent emphasis:

"I'm Lord Poppleham, and I've come after that scoundrel Parker!"

"Hush, my lord!" implored the sergeant.

"Hush be——" began his lordship, when he was interrupted by a startled cry from his noble friend.

"My God! I've got the jim-jams!"

Turning round they beheld Lord Clarence backing away from the armoured figure on the left, till with a resounding crash he bumped into the sentinel on the right. Fortunately, however, before he had time to make any further comment, Mr. Dobson, resourceful and discreet as ever, proffered his arm, and merely saying, "This way, my lord!" led him back to the wagonette, where within two minutes he was comfortably asleep again.

Meanwhile the startled footman had grasped the import of their visit and was speeding for the butler.

"Confound this delay! The man will be off, and I want to wring his neck!" fumed Lord Poppleham.

"Hush, my lord! Hush, for the love of 'Eaven!" implored the sergeant. "He won't be off unless you wakes him up!"

A stout, efficient-looking butler appeared with remarkable celerity, followed by a

second footman, and listened to the visitors' story with vast interest.

"I 'ad my suspicions of that Lord Clarence!" said he. "Very pleasant he's made himself, and no end they've thought of him; but *I* knows the real aristocracy, and I 'ad my suspicions!"

He turned to the sergeant and suggested a plan of campaign.

"We'd better guard the front door, just in case he makes a rush for it," said he. "If you leaves your constable here, I'll leave one of the footmen. 'Ere, George, you and the policeman stand by the front door and don't let no one get past you. Now, my lord, we'll go and rouse Mr. Jones and tell him what's 'appened."

"Mr. Jones be——" his lordship began indignantly.

"Hush, my lord!" prayed the sergeant.

"I've come to wring that fellow Parker's neck! Take me to his bedroom! I don't want to see old Jones!"

But the butler was firm.

"Mr. Jones has got to be informed first, my lord," said he, and as the sergeant backed him up, the whole party, consisting now of Lord Poppleham, the butler, the sergeant, Mr. Dobson, and the second footman, tiptoed warily upstairs and down a passage to Mr.

Jones's apartment. A minute's discreet knocking resulted in the faint creaking of a bed from within and the opening of the door a few inches.

"Who's that?" demanded a voice.

Up to this point Lord Poppleham had curbed his indignation with commendable self-restraint, but the prospect of waiting for further explanations while Mr. Parker's neck still remained unwrung, was too much for him.

"I'm Lord Poppleham!" he cried. "And I've come to arrest my valet!"

"Your who?" exclaimed the voice.

"Quietly, my lord!" implored the sergeant.

"The fellow who came here and called himself Lord Clarence Tuttebury! He's a scoundrel named Parker, and I'm going to wring his——"

"There he goes!" yelled the footman. "Come on!"

A figure attired in blue and white striped pyjamas had just slipped out of a door a little way along the passage and was already sprinting for the stairs; and the sight of his costume seemed to excite his lordship even more than the sight of his person.

"The damned fellow's wearing my pyjamas!" he shouted. "After him! After him!"

The corridor led straight on to a wide landing overlooking the hall. Right across this landing was the staircase; at the other end of the hall, opposite the foot of the staircase, was the front door; and stationed beside it were the constable and the other footman. With five men in full pursuit a few yards behind him, and two more waiting below warned by the shouts, it seemed long odds against the pseudo Lord Clarence. It seemed still longer when the fleeing figure actually stopped short at the corner where the corridor opened into the landing and stretched out his hand towards the wall.

"We've got him now!" shouted his late master. "Oh, damn!"

This last observation was caused by three simultaneous catastrophes. All the lights suddenly went out, the butler thereupon stopped short within two feet of his lordship's nose, while the sergeant, who was pounding hard on his lordship's heels, continued his career.

"'E's turned off all the switches!" gasped the butler from the bottom of the heap. "Run, 'Enery, and turn 'em on again!"

"I can't get up!" groaned the footman. "Somethink's that 'eavy on my chest!"

"I 'ear 'im comin' downstairs!" roared a

voice from the hall. "Turn on them lights again, quick as you can!"

"There's a switch beside the front door!" bawled the butler. "Turn it on yourself!"

"Can't find it!" yelled the voice from the hall. "It must 'ave gone and bin moved!"

"Moved be damned!" shouted the butler. "*Look* for it, can't you! 'Ere, who's that sitting on my legs? Get up, will you!"

"I've bitten my tongue. I can't get up yet!" groaned his lordship.

The footman was the first to extricate himself, and the lights went up again at last. From the top of the stairs the pursuing five gazed down into the hall; from the front door the guardian pair gazed up; and, motionless on their pedestals, the mail-clad sentinels gazed at one another, but there was no sign or vestige of the figure in blue and white pyjamas.

"Where the devil has he gone?" demanded Lord Poppleham.

"I'm sure I 'eard him runnin' downstairs, sir!" said the footman below.

"So did I, my lord," added the policeman. "And he can't have got out o' the front door, because we've bin standin' in front of it—that's sure and certain!"

"Then he's gone through one of the other doors in the hall, you silly ass!" cried his

lordship, whose feelings by this time were long past all restraint.

" Excuse me, my lord, but every one of them doors was shut when we went upstairs," said the butler. " Did either of you two hear the sound of a door being opened and shut again ? "

With great vehemence both constable and footman declared that they had heard no sound of a door either opening or shutting.

The sergeant eyed them doubtfully.

" You were standing too far away from the front door," said he. " I do believe the man slipped between you and got out ! "

" Stupid pair of idiots ! " cried his lordship wrathfully.

" I'll swear on my dying oath he didn't ! " declared the constable. " It would be clean impossible ! "

" Then," said the butler with an air of gloomy resignation, " he must have gone into the morning-room or the library, and by this time he'll have got out through a window and be far enough away ! "

" What's that ? " exclaimed several voices simultaneously.

A sound as of some one beating on wood was coming from somewhere.

" Some one at the front door ! " cried the constable.

"By Jove! If he's come back, I'll wring the fellow's . . ." began his lordship, but at this point the constable had the door open, and revealed Lord Clarence Tuttebury.

"Hullo, you blighters! What's up?" he demanded cheerfully.

With that, the excitement of the chase was renewed. Lord Clarence stoutly declared that he had awakened from his nap some short time ago, and had heard various sounds coming from the house, but that he was quite positive nobody had left, either by door or window.

"Then he is still in the house!" said the sergeant. "We'll see he doesn't give us the slip again, either!"

The appearance of Mr. Jones and two of the guests, attired in dressing-gowns, brought the number of Mr. Parker's pursuers up to eleven, and they were promptly distributed on the best strategic principles. Sentinels were placed at various points outside the house, while the rest of the party searched each room in turn thoroughly and systematically. And yet, at the end of a strenuons hour, there was not a sign of the erring Parker, nor a single clue to suggest what had become of him.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said the sergeant. "The man seems to have been and gone and vanished utterly!"

There seemed, indeed, to be nothing for it but to accept this unsatisfactory conclusion. It is true that there was, at least, the consolation of knowing that none of Mr. Jones's plate had vanished along with his late guest; and Lord Poppleham was able to lay down one very sound rule to guide him for the remainder of his natural life: "I'll take dashed good care I never again send on my luggage and my valet ahead of me!" said he. But vengeance, unfortunately, had to be forgone.

"The most mysterious thing that ever happened!" declared Mr. Jones, as he parted with the baffled police.

Yet had he been in the silent and deserted hall half an hour later, he would have beheld a phenomenon infinitely more mysterious than the mere disappearance of a latter-day adventurer. The moonbeams glimmering through the leaded panes revealed (had there been any to see the portent) a mediæval knight in the act of cautiously moving, foot by foot, towards the front door. His mail-clad hands fingered the bolts and lock gingerly, yet deftly; the door swung quietly open; and only one armoured sentinel was left to guard the house of Jones. The other was clanking briskly down the avenue.

CHAPTER VI

The Mysterious Stranger

"As a summer suiting, plate armour strikes me as somewhat heavy," said Mr. Essington to himself, as he stalked warily past the silent lodge and found himself in the dim high road. "On the other hand, it is better than an early death from consumption, which would be my probable fate if I continued my adventures in pyjamas."

Into the breast pocket of the pyjama coat he had hurriedly thrust his purse and cigar case, a match box, and a pocket handkerchief; his feet he had clad in a pair of Lord Poppleham's choicest silk socks and shiniest pumps; but apart from these accessories, there had been no time to remove anything except the blue and white striped pyjamas he was sleeping in, and the suit of armour in which he had taken temporary refuge.

"That is the worst of getting up in a hurry—though, after all, there is many a poor fellow with neither silk socks nor a suit of

armour," he reflected philosophically. "One might be much worse off."

After several attempts, he managed to raise the vizor of his helmet, insert a cigar into his mouth, and light it. And then at an easy saunter he strolled down the road and reviewed the possibilities of his new situation.

"It is less luxurious than valet to Lord Poppleham," he soliloquised, "but distinctly more romantic. The great difficulty is, how can one transport three tons of sheet platinum (which the thing is apparently made of) outside Mr. Jones's radius by the time he wakes up in the morning and discovers that one of his suits of armour has gone? It is obviously hopeless to look for anyone willing to exchange an outfit of clothes for a coat of mail at three o'clock in the morning. I am probably the only lunatic in the neighbourhood."

At this point in his meditations he came upon a signpost by the roadside, and stopped to examine it. Two arrows pointed in opposite directions, with the legends "Nutley, 5 miles," "Salchester, 18 miles," and these directions seemed to give Mr. Essington food for fresh and livelier thought.

"The finger of fate!" he said to himself. "My course is perfectly obvious. I must

make Mr. Jones look in one direction, and find something to convey me in the other. And as Jones will clearly be readier to believe I have gone a short distance in this dashed armour, while the longest trip is safest for me, I must obviously send him to Nutley, and look out for something to carry me to Salchester."

Mr. Essington was not one of those people who reason acutely what should be done and then continue in their easy chairs. If anything, indeed, he was inclined to somewhat precipitate action, and noticing a cottage by the roadside à short distance from the signboard, he strode straight for it, merely taking the precaution to close his vizor, but still carrying his cigar in his gauntletted fist.

A series of thunderous knocks at length brought an elderly and very sleepy-looking labourer to the door, and in his deepest voice the Knight Errant thus addressed him:

"Prythee, varlet, how far is't to Nutley town? Odzoons! Answer me, sirrah, or I pink thee!"

The elderly labourer no longer looked sleepy, but though his eyes were exceedingly wide open, his tongue seemed unable to articulate a single sound. In the same terrific voice, the knight continued:

"Peradventure, thinkst thou eke by walking briskly, can I reach this Nutley ere ye cock begins to crow? What, still thou answerest not? Pish!"

And with this contemptuous excerpt from the romantic past, the formidable figure—according to the sworn testimony of the labourer next morning—faded away.

In point of fact, the knight took the precaution of starting in the direction of Nutley, but when he had clanked as audibly as possible for some fifty yards, he paused, raised his vizor again, and relit his cigar.

"I must take dashed good care I don't repeat my mistake the last time I played this trick!" he said to himself. "If I turn up in Nutley, I'll deserve to be nailed! And now, the game manifestly is to steal a horse, ride within a mile of Salchester before daybreak, lie low till dark, and then trust to luck. And by Gad, there's the very horse!"

The knight paused no longer than he had done before. Within three minutes he was mounted.

* * * * *

The shades of night had already fallen when the small boys in a certain quiet street in the outskirts of the cathedral town of

Salchester enjoyed a very lively sensation of pleasure. It was quite dark and a drizzling rain had begun to fall, but once they had observed the phenomenon, there was no thought of retiring indoors. A tall figure, walking rather wearily, was clanking his way into town, apparently from the country. It was the clanking which first attracted the attention of the small boys, and as soon as they realised that this unusual sound was caused by the stranger being clad from head to foot in complete armour, they immediately paid him the compliment of deciding to see him safely through his adventure—whatever it was.

Accordingly, within a few minutes of his first appearance, the mysterious stranger found himself escorted by a rapidly increasing crowd, who took advantage of the fact that it seemed improbable he could run very fast, to pass a number of pointed comments on his appearance. The vizor of his helmet being closed, they could catch no glimpse of his face, but they were very interested to observe that wherever a gap in his panoply permitted his under-garments to be seen, these appeared to be of blue and white striped flannel. The opinion was therefore widely and loudly expressed that he was going to play in a football match, and had

attired himself in armour to keep out the rain.

Meanwhile, within his defences of steel, the stranger was debating his future programme with rather less than his usual optimism.

"I am obviously doing it for a bet," he said to himself, "and I can always walk into the best hotel in the place, say I've won, and ask for the loan of a suit of clothes on the strength of my victory. Then, by Gad, I might give a little dinner to celebrate my exploit, tell them to put it down in the bill, and bolt in the middle of the night! On the other hand, bolting two nights running will be a trifle monotonous, and one must never forget that this is a pleasure trip." He scowled round on the thickening mob of small boys, and added with quite unusual ferocity for so good-humoured an adventurer: "Damn the little brutes! If I try to kick them I shall probably overbalance myself, but if I do nothing the street will soon be blocked."

The more he reflected on the situation, the less promising did the bet, dinner, and bolt solution appear.

"The police will come to clear the street, the local papers will send reporters to interview me, and between them somebody will

probably spot me. This corner is really beginning to look rather tight."

Fortune, however, undoubtedly favours the enterprising; or it may simply be that the enterprising know how to take advantage of the off chances which fortune casts at random among the crowd. In any case, just as he had decided that the corner was getting a little too tight, Mr. Essington's alert eye perceived an off chance. He had arrived at a turning where his quiet street fell into a busier and brightly-lighted thoroughfare, and at the very moment when he reached it, a cab drove past. It seemed to be full of people, and he caught a fleeting glimpse of a tinsel crown, a ruff and spangles.

"A fancy dress ball!" he said to himself exultantly. "Saved, by Jingo!"

Five minutes later he had arrived at a brilliantly illuminated mansion, with a stream of red carpet flowing, as it were, from its open door, and an enthusiastic crowd of spectators already gathered in the street. When Mr. Essington's own private crowd was added to these, the cheers that greeted each Sir Walter Raleigh and Mary Queen of Scots would have gratified royalty. But the star turn was undoubtedly the Knight in Armour, whose passage up the crimson carpet gave the delighted spectators an

opportunity of completely refuting the legend that Englishmen are an undemonstrative race. All they require, in fact, is some object worthy of a demonstration, and the stately figure in steel with his attendant horde of small boys provided it.

The Knight himself had by this time quite regained his spirits, and bowed his acknowledgments in all directions as he advanced. Yet, even in this hour of triumph, he suddenly noted one perturbing little circumstance. In the very front rank of the crowd, placed where he could study each fresh arrival, stood a small figure in a large bowler hat.

CHAPTER VII

The Rival Ladies

" Who the deuce is that fellow looking for ? " wondered Mr. Essington.

The thought, however, had barely time to flash through his mind, when he found himself within the hall and confronted by a more immediate problem. At the open door of a large reception-room, already full of popular historical personages, a butler stepped up to him and asked :

" What name, sir ? "

"Sir Galahad de Bracy," replied the stately visitor.

" Guests are being announced under their real names, sir," replied the butler, courteously but firmly.

" Ah, in that case," said the Knight with an air of conceding the point without demur, " simply announce me as Sir Galahad. De Bracy is fictitious ; don't add that."

" Sir Gala Had ! " announced the butler.

A lady covered with sequins down to her

knees, and diaphanous silk below, held out a welcoming hand, and gazed at the closed helmet with extreme curiosity.

"Well, really!" she exclaimed. "You have quite mystified us!"

"It's old Jobson!" said a gentleman in a turban at her side, holding out his hand in turn. "*I* know you, old fellow!"

"Don't give me away!" replied a voice within the helmet.

"By Jove, it isn't Jobson!" exclaimed the gentleman. "Now, who the deuce. . . ?"

The Knight bent forward as if to whisper his name, and then seemed to change his mind.

"I'll tell you afterwards," said he. "See if you can guess first!" and with a friendly pat of his gauntletted hand on his host's back, the mysterious guest passed into the throng.

"The next thing is to find the supper-room!" said he to himself as he edged into a quiet corner and surveyed the gorgeous scene. Elizabeths, Marys, Sir Walters, mandarins, and many other picturesque celebrities were already assembled in scores, and more were still arriving. At the further end of the reception-room, double doors, thrown wide open, led to the ball-room. It, too, was well filled, both with dancers and groups

round the wall, and whenever he saw his chance, Sir Galahad was now working his way as unobtrusively as possible behind their backs. Another door half-way down the side of the ball-room was his goal, and he was standing by the wall, waiting for a chance of slipping quietly out, when he heard a soft voice at his shoulder whisper:

"Basil!"

Bending his helmeted head, the Knight beheld a lady habited in the romantic costume of Spain, with a velvet mask across her face, through which a pair of dark eyes were looking up at him tenderly. Her figure, her hair, her mouth, her chin—all of her that he could see, was eminently desirable.

"Darling!" he whispered back.

For an instant the lady started, and a shade of doubt clouded her eyes.

"Is my voice well enough disguised?" he asked quickly.

The doubt fled, and redoubled tenderness returned.

"Splendidly!" she whispered. "For a moment even *I* didn't recognise it!"

"Can we be too careful?" he inquired in the same hushed voice.

"Oh, you know we can't!" she breathed softly.

"I know now," said he to himself; and

aloud he asked. "Does anyone suspect?"

"If Jim recognised you, of course he would!"

"Jim!" repeated Sir Galahad in a tone calculated to suggest any emotion the lady cared to attach to it; and then for an instant he gently pressed her gloved hand, and learned still more; "A wedding ring; so Jim's the husband!"

"But he can't!" she added. "No one could tell it was you!"

"How did you know me yourself?" he asked.

"Ah!" she whispered with a melting smile. "My heart told me, Basil!"

"How accurate they are!" said he.

"But it isn't safe to talk here! Follow me—but don't let anyone notice!"

In a minute the lady had slipped through the door ahead; and a moment later Sir Galahad slipped after her.

"Where shall we go?" she asked.

"The supper room's the safest place."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"Do you really think so?"

"No one will suspect us there!" he urged. "You lead the way; I'll follow."

The supper-room was quite empty save for two or three maids behind a buffet and a solitary guest sitting at a corner table. The

lady paused in the door and scrutinised this lonely guest.

"Do you know who that man is?" she asked.

The Knight looked at the fierce moustache, the hat drawn down over the brows, and the beltful of pistols of the solitary gentleman, and suggested:

"Something in the nature of a pirate apparently."

"But I mean—he is nobody who will know us?"

"I guarantee him," declared Sir Galahad, who was by this time exceedingly hungry, and had already marked down an inviting-looking cold ham. "There is nothing to fear, darling!"

They seated themselves at the further side of the room, the Knight thinking rapidly.

"A little supper—home with her in a cab—borrow a suit of Jim's clothes——"

At this point his reverie was interrupted by the lady's hand slipping into his.

"Basil!" she cried, in a hushed but moving voice. "I can wait no longer—the uncertainty is killing me—we must decide to-night!"

Having already decided both on the ham and an equally tempting boned turkey, the Knight endeavoured to release his hand, but found it difficult.

"It will look more natural, dearest, if we pretend to be eating a little supper," he suggested. "Let me help you to something."

"Oh, I want nothing to *eat*, Basil!"

"Then I'll pretend alone," said he, and freed his hand at last.

It was several minutes before their conversation was resumed, and he noticed that the lady's voice, though still affectionate, had now a trace of reproach.

"You call that pretending!" said she.

He placed a plateful of turkey and ham, and a glass of champagne on the table, gazed at them for a moment, and then murmured quietly but emphatically:

"Dash it!"

"What is the matter, Basil?" she asked apprehensively.

"I am in a dilemma, darling," replied the Knight.

And, in fact, he was, for it had just occurred to him forcibly that unless he raised his vizor, supper was impossible; while if he did raise it, the promising adventure was at an end.

"Basil!" she said. "Tell me . . ."

She stopped abruptly, for at that moment another lady entered the room, and without a trace of hesitation came straight to their

table. The approving eye of Sir Galahad noted that she was tall, fair, and handsome; but it noted also that she was evidently in a state of strong emotion.

"George!" she said in a musical but very determined voice. "Come home at once!"

"May I ask why?" inquired the Knight mildly.

"You know perfectly well!" said she. "And I should hardly imagine you wish me to tell you in presence of . . ." she paused for an instant, and surveyed the masked friend of Basil with a swift, searching glance; and then finished in a tone that might have implied many things—"of this lady."

The dark lady rose on the instant, and confronted her with flaming eyes.

"May *I* ask who you suppose this gentleman is, and why you wish him to go home with you?" she demanded.

"He is my husband," replied the fair lady, "and I insist upon his coming home because I only permitted him to go to this ball on the specific understanding he was to touch nothing stronger than lemonade. And that—" she pointed at the glass of champagne—"is how he keeps his word!"

The Knight had been looking from one to the other of these rival claimants. The dark lady might very possibly be as handsome

as the fair when she removed her mask, he decided, but again she might not. Also, the fair lady had evidently the means of conveying him safely from the ball, and a change of clothes could be guaranteed; whereas in the other case these advantages were problematical.

"All right, dearest, I shall come with you," said he.

The dark lady's eyes were blazing now.

"No you won't!" she cried.

"He will!" pronounced the fair lady.

The Knight gazed down at his untasted supper and decided that that must come first.

"Ladies," said he, raising his vizor, "a gentleman who combines the fascinations of Basil with the engaging frailty of George, should appeal to any woman worthy of her sex! Suppose we all three have a little supper together, and then toss which of you is to bear me away?"

But with a smothered shriek the dark lady had already resigned her claims, and was hastening for the door. The fair lady only paused long enough to make one brief comment.

"A 'gentleman'!" said she, and followed her late rival.

"If I hadn't been so devilish hungry,"

reflected the Knight, "what an amusing evening I might have spent!"

A refreshing draught of champagne had been followed by a delicious mouthful of turkey, and the two ladies were already becoming a pleasant reminiscence, when he was a little disturbed to notice the solitary Pirate rise from his corner table, and march towards him.

"Is this one of the husbands, or Basil himself?" he wondered.

The Pirate continued his advance till nothing but the small table separated them. Leaning over it, he looked very hard at the Knight.

"Mr. Essington!" said he.

CHAPTER VIII

In the Street

Mr. Essington remained to all appearances perfectly at his ease; but his gauntletted fist closed, and his first swift thoughts ran—" Can I knock him down, and bolt in this kit before the alarm is raised ? "

" I am afraid you have the advantage of me, sir," he replied with distant politeness.

For answer the stranger snatched the piratical moustache off his face and inquired:

" Do you know me now ? "

" By Jove, it's Tooting ! " cried the Knight, adding with every appearance of enthusiasm, " The very fellow I wanted to meet ! "

" My name is Toothill," said the ex-pirate stiffly.

" All the better," smiled the Knight. " It makes me want to meet you even more."

Mr. Toothill continued to gaze at him very hard, and without any answering smile.

" Have you found her ? ' he demanded.

" Found her ? " repeated Mr. Essington,

running hurriedly in his mind over all the ladies he had met lately. "I've found several, which would you like to meet?"

Charles seemed a trifle disconcerted.

"I'm not rotting," said he. "I mean—er—*her* of course!"

"Give it a name, my dear fellow," said Mr. Essington sympathetically, "and I'll introduce you if I can."

"Your ward—Beatrix Staynes!"

For a moment, Mr. Essington was (on his own candid admission) as nearly clean bowled out as he had ever been in his whole career.

"Er—ah—oh—of course, of course, my dear Toothill!"

Here the usually ready gentleman was actually forced to drain his glass of champagne in default of immediate inspiration. "Well the fact is, my dear chap, I've been looking for her like the very devil——" At this point some recollection of his last meeting with Mr. Toothill began to return to his memory, and he inquired with genuine solicitude. "By the way, have you met your friend, that delightful fellow—er—what's his name . . . ?"

"You mean Ridley?"

"Ridley, of course! I've often thought of him—all but the name. Have you met him since we parted?"

"No," said Charles, gazing at him fixedly. "I haven't seen him, and I never got a letter from him."

"How very extraordinary!" exclaimed Mr. Essington. "I really cannot understand this at all."

"Did you give him my address?"

"I made him take it down in his pocket-book."

Even this convincing piece of testimony failed to restore confidence to Mr. Toothill's face.

"Why should he take it down?" he demanded. "He knows my aunt's address perfectly well."

"Of course! I was thinking of another fellow who took an address down. You went to visit your aunt; yes, yes, I remember. Staying with her still?"

"Naturally. I arranged with you to go there and stay till I heard from Ridley. Besides, after what you got me to do, I thought it safer to lie low."

"Now what the devil did I get him to do?" said Mr. Essington to himself, and then a further recollection returned to him. "You lent me a fiver, didn't you?" said he. "It was really very good of you, Toothill."

"A fiver!" exclaimed Charles indignantly. "I lent you nearly everything in my purse,

and then ran five whole dashed miles, and knocked down a policeman and two porters to help you to get away! And ever since then I've been in a blue funk of being arrested for abettin' your escape, and wonderin' why I never heard from Philip Ridley, and hopin' you had discovered Beatrix—and now, here you turn up in fancy dress with a couple of women nearly fightin' over you, and you seem to have forgotten every dashed thing I did! Did you by any chance forget to give Philip my address?"

"My dear Toothill," replied Mr. Essington in his most soothing tones, "this suspicion is really unworthy of you! Tut, tut! For shame, my good fellow! By the way, you will excuse me going on with my supper, won't you?"

For a few minutes he attacked the turkey and ham with the ardour of one who has fasted long, while Mr. Toothill continued to stare at him with suspicion written on every lineament of his honest face. Then at last Charles spoke:

"I'll very soon find out the truth," said he.

"What truth?" smiled Mr. Essington, refilling his glass.

"Whether you really gave Philip my address, and what you've been doin', and why you don't seem to know anything at all

about Beatrix. I wrote to Philip yesterday and I got a wire this afternoon saying he was comin' down here this evening."

Mr. Essington looked at him quickly.

"You don't mean to say my friend Ridley is to be in Salchester to-night? I should like to meet him again."

"You've got to," said Charles truculently.

Mr. Essington's brows rose ever so slightly and for an instant there was something in his eye that made Mr. Toothill frown back at him defiantly.

"I'll tell you why you've got to," added Charles. "You told me you and Philip were goin' to stick together and hunt for Beatrix, but you obviously know nothing about Philip's whereabouts, and you had quite forgotten all about Beatrix. It's my belief you simply took advantage of our innocent confidence!"

"What did you imagine I would do with it?" inquired Mr. Essington. "Innocent confidence is much too valuable to be wasted, I assure you."

"Then you actually admit it?" exclaimed Charles with the sternest look of which his ingenuous countenance was capable. "I shall know better another time, anyhow!"

Mr. Essington looked at him alertly.

"What will you bet?"

"Bet on what?"

"That you will know any better next time."

"I won't bet with you," said Charles, "which shows that I know better already."

Mr. Essington rose and grasped his hand.

"I have been mistaken in you, Toothill!" he declared gravely. "You are now a man to be feared!"

Thereupon he poured out another glass of champagne, drained it without a pause, and then assuming an active, businesslike air, yet with a flattering note of deference for Mr. Toothill's abilities, he suggested:

"What about making a start now? If you fetch your overcoat, I'll be getting my bag, and we'll meet at the top of the back stairs."

Charles looked at him doubtfully.

"Where is your bag?" he inquired.

"In the bedroom where I changed."

"What! You changed in this house?"

"Certainly."

"I shall come with you."

Mr. Essington promptly sat down again.

"My dear Toothill, we must trust each other a little better than this," said he. "I trust you to go and fetch your coat. You must trust me to go and fetch my bag."

Charles continued to stare at him, veiled suspicion in his eye.

"Why meet at the top of the back stairs?" he asked.

"Because I don't propose to go out by the front door. I noticed a gentleman waiting outside whom I am not particularly anxious to meet."

"Who was he?"

"I only wish I knew. He was a small individual in a bowler hat."

Suddenly Charles exhibited lively excitement.

"Was the bowler too big for him?" he cried. "And had he sort of ferrety lookin' eyes?"

"By Jove, the very man!" exclaimed Essington. "What do you know about him?"

"He's the blighter who gave us the note at the station!"

"This is very extraordinary!" murmured Essington. "What the deuce can be the connection between . . ." He broke off, and for a moment sat silent. Then he sprang up again. "Well," said he, "there is no use wondering. The point is to give him the slip. You agree to the back stairs now?"

"Rather!" said Charles.

A few minutes later a cloaked figure was

waiting in the obscurity of a dimly lit passage, far removed from the other revellers. The strains of a waltz and the murmur of voices rose from below, but up there everything was utterly quiet. The minutes passed more slowly than Charles had ever known them pass before, and then to his vast relief he heard the faint clank of mail.

"Follow me!" whispered the Knight, "and don't make a sound you can help!"

Inexplicable though it may appear to those who have followed his movements during the evening, he actually was carrying a large leather kit bag, and apparently had come from the bedroom regions.

"Through here!" he whispered, peeping into a dark room, as soon as they reached the ground floor. Stealthily he closed the door behind them and groped his way to the window.

"But I say!" protested Charles, "do you mean we are goin' to get out by a window?"

"Hush!" replied the Knight, gently raising the sash.

"But if we are caught? It looks so dashed like burglars!"

The only answer was a nerve-shaking clatter of steel as Sir Galahad dropped on to a garden path. In frenzied haste the cloaked pirate dropped out after him and hastened

in his wake down a path between shrubbery. Over his shoulder Mr. Essington whispered gleefully :

" A summer-house ! Luck is with us ! "

Once inside the summer-house he wasted no time. Off went the panoply of mail and the blue-and-white pyjamas, and inside of ten minutes he was dressed in a suit of grey tweeds, a pair of brown boots, and a cloth cap.

" Thank the Lord, they fit ! " he said to himself devoutly.

From a window of the house a ray of light penetrated through the half-open door, and presently as Mr. Essington moved the empty kit bag aside, the ray fell upon it.

" Hullo ! " exclaimed Charles, pointing to the bag, " J. W. D.—whose initials are those ? "

" My old uncle's—John Wilson Dawkins," Mr. Essington explained. " I hired the bag from him."

" They are the same as our host's initials —J. W. Dewhurst ; what a dashed rum coincidence ! "

" Dashed rum," Mr. Essington agreed, lacing up the brown boots. His next performance also struck Mr. Toothill as distinctly rum. In the roof of the summer-house was a trap-door opening into a small loft, and through this aperture Mr. Essington proceeded

to push first his pyjamas, then his armour, and finally his uncle's kit bag.

"Now," said he, "if you wait here by the door keeping an eye on the house to see that nobody comes out, I'll go and look for the garden gate. When I find it I'll give you a whistle."

He opened the door as he spoke and in another instant would have been gone, when, with a sudden bound, Charles had him by the arm.

"No, you don't!" said he. "You're *not* goin' to take advantage of any innocent confidence this time!"

Mr. Essington felt the iron grip and glanced down at the burly form of Mr. Toothill, and submitted to the inevitable as gracefully as ever.

"What a suspicious fellow it is!" he laughed, and with affectionate humour drew the muscular arm still further through his own.

Charles felt a pang of generous contrition.

"Sorry, old bird," said he, "but I can't afford to run any risks this time. It's all for *her* sake, you know."

"I know, I know!" said her guardian. "I assure you I would do exactly the same in your place, Toothill."

A gate at the foot of the garden led into a lane, and this again into a side street.

There was not a soul in sight as they paced arm in arm along the silent pavement.

"It's not much more than ten minutes' walk to the County Hotel, from the corner," observed Charles, as they reached the junction of a wider thoroughfare, where even at that hour a certain amount of traffic was moving. "Once we get there, I'll leave Philip to settle things with you. My job will be finished when I hand you safely over to him."

"Ten minutes' walk!" exclaimed Mr. Essington, stopping short as he spoke. "And that spy hanging about! My dear Toothill, this isn't safe!"

A shade of apprehension clouded Mr. Toothill's face likewise.

"By Jove, I'd forgotten about him," said he. "But—dash it!—there's nothing for it but risking it now."

"I am in your hands . . ." Mr. Essington began, and then exclaimed, "There comes a cab! Let's take that."

The cab had been approaching them at a walk ever since they reached the corner, but the usually resourceful gentleman had apparently not noticed it before.

"Good egg!" said Charles. "Hi, cabby!"

As the cab drew up beside them, Mr. Essington—his arm still firmly held—stepped up to the driver and said in an urgent voice:

"We want to go to the County Hotel, cabman, and we don't want anyone to follow us. I shall make the fare ten shillings if you follow these instructions. Whip up your horse and go off at a gallop the very instant you hear me say 'Drive like the devil!' You quite understand?"

"I understands, sir," said the cabman, tightening the reins and raising his whip ready for the spurt.

Charles looked a little dubious.

"I say," he whispered, "won't that make him think . . ."

"Cabbies never think. Will you get in first?"

"No," said Charles emphatically. "I'll see you in first."

Mr. Essington opened the door and for an instant Charles had to let go his arm. His captive put one foot on the step and then suddenly kicked out with the other leg. The flat of his foot caught Charles fair on the chest, and the next instant the ex-pirate was sitting on the pavement, while the ex-knight was shouting, "Drive like the devil!" Then the whip cracked and the cab started off at a gallop.

Mr. Toothill neither swore nor shouted, but with a very grim face and clenched teeth, picked himself up and set off at top speed

after the fleeing cab. It had covered about forty yards when he overtook it, and still he said never a word, but, springing on to the step, threw the door open and tumbled inside. And then at last he spoke :

" You dashed, treacherous . . ." he began, and then stopped abruptly. Save for himself the cab was quite empty.

" Diddled me again ! " he groaned. " The blighter has got out on the other side ! Oh Lord, what will Philip think of me, losin' him like this ! " And then a final calamity left him speechless : " And I'll have to pay the cabby that ten bob ! "

* * * * *

Mr. Ridley had not arrived, he was informed, but the last train was not yet in, and, as his room had been booked, he would doubtless appear very shortly.

" Oh Lord, how am I to break the news to him ! " he thought, as he turned disconsolately away from the office window.

" By the way, sir," the clerk called after him, " there is a telegram waiting for Mr. Ridley, so he is sure to be coming."

" A telegram ! " said Charles to himself with a flicker of cheerfulness. " That sounds more hopeful ! "

PART IV

CHAPTER I

Sir Joshua

On a certain afternoon Mr. Mason received a visitor. Annette saw him, as she saw every one who came to that house. How she managed it, she alone knew, but there she was, by some curious coincidence passing through the hall just as this visitor was entering the library. Her brief glimpse showed him to be a stoutly built, elderly gentleman, with a heavy forehead and a chin somewhat receding, anxious eyes with loose bags of skin beneath them, and—despite his nervous manner—the air of a person of some consequence. She noticed also that he seemed on friendly terms with the butler and whispered something confidential as he passed into the room.

" Who is that gentleman, Mr. Cheal ? " she asked with her most seductive smile, as the door closed behind him.

" A visitor for Mr. Mason," said Mr. Cheal.

" A visitor without a name ? " she smiled.

But Mr. Cheal was caution itself this afternoon.

"If he wanted his name mentioned I'd tell it you," said he.

"Oh, a mysterious visitor!"

"That's as may be," said Mr. Cheal, walking off. And then suddenly he turned and said: "Oh, by the way, don't you say nothing to Miss Staynes about anyone having called."

"Then Mr. Meestery does not wish her informed?"

"You may take it that's how the land lies," he conceded.

"Oh, but I can take a hint!" she smiled, and then as she went upstairs she shrugged her shoulders and murmured, "I wonder who!"

Within the library Mr. Mason received his visitor apparently with more surprise than pleasure.

"Well, Uncle Joshua, what's brought you?" he asked. "You haven't come to see Beatrix, I hope."

"Not necessarily." said Sir Joshua, "unless . . ."

"Under no circumstances!" said Mr. Mason emphatically.

Though they stood in the relation of uncle and nephew by blood, and senior and junior

partner in the firm of Horsham and Stukley by business arrangement, there was no doubt who was actually the dominating personality. Mr. Mason, indeed, spoke to his uncle this afternoon almost as he might to a clerk.

"Well," said Sir Joshua, "as a matter of fact I didn't want her even to know I was here, unless there were any necessity."

"There is none," Mr. Mason assured him. "It might spoil everything. You remember that I was to have a free hand?"

"I am not disputing it, Harry. . . ."

"All right. Then what brought you down?"

"Have you heard anything of Francis?"

"Not yet. Have you?"

Mr. Mason's manner was brief, and, one would say, unconcerned. Sir Joshua glanced at him sharply.

"Don't you realise the danger?" he asked.

Mr. Mason merely shrugged his shoulders, but a twitch of his brows and a glint in his eye betrayed him.

"Pooh! There is none. What can a wandering lunatic do?"

"Francis is capable of any—er—eccentricity."

"Eccentricity! Exactly. And that's all he is capable of." He paused for a moment and then repeated in a manner somewhat

at variance with his last words, "I asked you if you had heard nothing about him yourself. Have you?"

"Absolutely nothing at all."

Mr. Mason paced to the window and back again.

"Where the deuce can the man have got to!" he exclaimed. "I've put Piggot on his track, and the little devil doesn't often lose the scent. Can Francis have committed suicide?"

Sir Joshua shook his head.

"The very last thing he is likely to do, I am afraid—that is to say, I should think."

"Then where has he hidden himself?"

Sir Joshua made no attempt to solve the problem.

"Have you heard anything further of Ridley?" he asked.

"I have had him watched. He isn't with Francis; though I am absolutely certain he let him out!"

"What has he been doing?"

"He has been in London—consulting a lawyer, evidently. He has been seen going into Bannerman, Perry and Haines's office."

"The criminal solicitors?" exclaimed Sir Joshua.

"Yes."

"But—Good Heavens, Harry!—I don't

like this at all. Perry is the very last fellow we want poking his nose into our affairs!"

Harry Mason turned on him viciously.

"I wish to God you would keep your sense of proportion!" said he. "We have done nothing illegal. You are her only acting guardian at present. You can take what steps you like. If you choose to place her in my care, who can question your decision?"

"*I* didn't choose——"

Mr. Mason interrupted him sharply.

"You can't plead that excuse. You know perfectly well you can't. You are responsible—but, as I say, you have done nothing illegal, and you can snap your fingers at Perry and Ridley and Co.!"

"But if anything came out, it—er—it wouldn't look well, Harry."

"Look!" exclaimed Mr. Mason contemptuously. "What do looks matter at present? Do you or don't you want to see yourself in the dock? That's the whole point."

Sir Joshua winced.

"The speculation was yours," he protested. "And taking the trust money to make good your losses . . ."

"*My* losses! They were the firm's. You are responsible. You know you are. You

knew everything that was going on—or ought to have known."

"*Ought!*" groaned Sir Joshua. "That's different."

"Is it? If I stand in the dock, so will you—and you know it."

The unfortunate senior partner passed his handkerchief over his brow. His eyes shifted constantly, and it almost seemed as if the bags beneath them had got deeper since he came.

"If only your sister were here, Harry!" he began, in a moment. "I have duties towards Beatrix, after all—and leaving her alone with you—can't you get Elizabeth to come? Or some other woman?"

"And spoil the whole game? We are playing for high stakes, and we can't afford to care what people might say *if* they knew. They don't know, and they shan't know. And, after all, what if they knew? As her guardian, you hold all the trumps. I tell you again, you have a perfect right to place her in any house you please. And you can always forbid her marriage with anybody else! That will soon choke off Mr. Ridley when he realises what it means. You told him emphatically and finally that you forbade the engagement, didn't you?"

"Yes, I wrote and told him so emphatically."

"He evidently doesn't believe you mean it yet. If he sees you are firm, that will be the end of him. And once she knows he is off for good, the road is clear. You've only got to be firm! There is absolutely nothing to fear in that case."

Sir Joshua looked up at the younger man as though he longed to be inoculated with his confidence.

"Is it possible for Perry to find out anything about the state of the firm's affairs?" he asked in a moment.

"Quite impossible. We are absolutely safe for a month, at least."

Again he paced the room, his hands in his pockets, and his eyes on the floor. Then he stopped abruptly before his uncle, and said:

"I know their game perfectly! Mr. Ridley is putting his money on Essington. He has got him stowed away somewhere, and Perry and he are going to try to prove he is sane enough to give his consent, and then put the screw on you to consent, too. It's a dangerous game for them if it gets out! Abetting the escape of a lunatic and keeping him in concealment is a pretty serious offence. Once we catch Francis, they are settled! The boot will be on the other leg then!"

"Can't you," Sir Joshua began again in a moment, "can't you induce Beatrix to take

you without any further delay—and just as things stand ? "

" One has to be devilish careful in that matter," said Mr. Mason.

" But time is precious, Harry ! "

" I know it is." He stood silent for a minute, and then suddenly exclaimed, " It might be worth risking something ! I've half a mind to ! "

A few minutes later Sir Joshua departed, as quietly and unostentatiously as he had come.

CHAPTER II

Annette's Advice

A CLOCK ticked on the dining-room mantelpiece, but that was the only sound in the room. Mr. Mason sipped his port in silence, and the fair young girl opposite kept her eyes fixed on her plate. They might have been sitting for a picture of *mariage de convenance.*

At last he spoke.

"You are desperately quiet to-night, Beatrix!"

Those who knew Harry Mason well would have perceived the effort it cost him to speak lightly and throw in his half-laugh, but the girl simply took his words for what they seemed to be.

"I am very sorry, Cousin Harry," she said, with a little smile that died away as suddenly as it came. "My thoughts were wandering; I—I am not very happy."

"What's the matter?"

She answered nothing for a minute, and then her words came with a rush.

"I am unhappy about Philip! I *must* find out what has happened. I really must, Cousin Harry! You have been very kind to me, and I know Sir Joshua wants me to stay here till his house is ready for me, and I don't want to do anything to displease him, but I can't wait here in suspense any longer! I'm going to try and find out about Philip for myself!"

He controlled a start, but his stare sent her eyes down again.

"You mean you want to go yourself and —and make inquiries?"

She looked up again and met his gaze firmly.

"Yes," she said.

"You won't trust my word?"

"But you have been able to find out practically nothing!"

He finished his glass of port, and seemed to come to a sudden resolution.

"Beatrix," he said, in quite a different voice. "There are other men in the world who care for you, besides this fellow Ridley—men who do appreciate you, who wouldn't desert you even for a single moment, who know what you are worth. . . ."

He had been speaking very earnestly so far, and with a ring of suppressed emotion that pleased his own critical sense, but at

these last words she chanced to look up from her plate for an instant, and he read a thought in her eyes that never could have sprung from Beatrix's simple heart.

"I mean what your heart and—er—beauty are worth," he explained hastily, but his critical sense missed the ring of genuine feeling this time. He tried to make up for it by still more fervour of expression. "You are the most charming girl I have ever seen, Beatrix! You are like a ray of . . ." (his critical sense rejected "sunshine" hurriedly, and he decided to hasten on to another simile). "You are like a jewel! You are like . . ."

This time he was interrupted by the girl herself. She rose from the table, her eyes still downcast, and her colour high.

"You shouldn't say these things, Cousin Harry!" she said hurriedly. "I—I can't stay here any longer if you do!"

He had the self-restraint and tact to hurry to the door and hold it open, merely murmuring as she passed out, "I am sorry, Beatrix, dear. I won't offend again!"

It was five minutes or so later, and Mr. Mason had already finished another glass of port, and poured himself out yet a third, when the door opened as noiselessly as if a ghost were entering.

"Pardon my disturbing you, sir," said a voice at his back.

Mr. Mason turned with a start, a scowl still set on his brow.

"What the devil . . .! Oh it's you, Annette. Well?"

"What have you been doing?" she asked quietly.

"What d'ye mean?"

"You have done something to upset the little Meess Beatrix. What is it?"

"Is she still upset?"

"Very much upset. Have you forgotten what I did warn you? Have you not been careful?"

"Damn it, Annette . . ." he began.

She stopped him with a little upraised finger.

"Ah, no swearing! I do not like to be sworn at, besides, it is bad for you—very bad. You must keep more cool—till the time comes."

"But when is it to come? Do you know what she told me to-night? She said she was going to leave me and look for that creature Ridley!"

Annette opened her black eyes very wide.

"Such a leetle deceiver I never knew!" she exclaimed. "She has made me think—actually made *me*!—that Mr. Ridley was

beginning to get forgotten. And all the time she is wanting him more than ever! Oh, but something must now be done."

"Just what I thought, and so I began to tell her that there were other men who admired her. I didn't even say I was speaking for myself . . ."

She interrupted with a little mocking laugh.

"How simple men sometimes are! As if any woman in the world would not jump instantly to the conclusion a man meant himself—even if perhaps he really did not! Never, never say the word 'love' to a woman —even in joke, even as part of a sermon— unless you wish her to think she has been given another heart to play with! Bah! I am a woman—I know them."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't actually use the word 'love.'"

"Oh, but you need not say any more than 'like' to most women. Such fools they are— as foolish as men! So then she got offended, did she?"

"More or less."

"'More or less'—what a Breetish expression! It would tell me nothing if I had not seen her afterwards for myself."

"Look here, Annette," said he, "it would be much more to the point if you would tell me what I ought to do, and not what I

ought not to have done. Can one afford to do nothing and simply keep on waiting after what she said to me?"

"No," she said slowly. "No, something should be done." She came close up to his chair and lowered her voice. "She is in your house—unprotected! What do you lack? Courage?"

He turned in his chair with a start.

"Hang it, Annette, there are limits!"

"On the other hand—there is failure!"

He hesitated for a moment.

"I—I'll think things over. *Something* must be done!"

"And what else is there?"

Again he hesitated, and then with a look of relief, saw the door open again. This time it was Mr. Cheal, the butler.

"Mr. Piggot is here to see you, sir," said he. "I have shown him into the library."

Mr. Mason sprang up on the instant.

"I'll think about it," he murmured as he passed Annette.

She stood for a moment looking after him with unfathomable eyes. Then she said to herself, "Piggot! What news has he brought?"

Mr. Cheal had disappeared when she went out into the hall. She gazed at the library door, and then stealthily drew nearer to it.

All at once it opened, and Mr. Mason glanced out. She smiled at him with impudent assurance.

"You are getting suspicious, too!" said she.

"I have need to be," he answered grimly, and pointed to the stairs.

"I have taught him something," she said to herself, as she went up to her mistress's room. "I wonder whether I have taught him enough!"

CHAPTER III

MR. PIGGOT'S REPORT

MR. PIGGOT sat very upright on the edge of his chair, his bowler hat in his hand, his sharp, close-set eyes fixed hard on Mr. Mason, as though the habit of transfixing people had become too confirmed to be broken even if the person were his own employer.

"I'm telling you the plain, simple truth, sir," said he. "That there man has vanished like as if he was a bloomin' firework! It's the mysteriousest thing ever I heard tell of—vanishing like a firework with 'Enry Piggot after 'im! I never knowed a man play such a trick on me before!"

"Tell me exactly what happened, so far as you were able to follow his movements," said Mr. Mason.

"Well, sir, 'ow he got away on the train to begin with, with both stations bein' watched, is an unsoluble mystery to start on. Anyhow, he did get off in the train and fell in with a soft-'eaded young curate what was travelling

by that train likewise. Essington stuffs 'im up about murderers wantin' to kill him, gets him to change clothes and then pulls the communication cord and fires 'im out into the dark! That was 'is first giddy performance."

"Then I gathered that he impersonated the curate somewhere?"

"With the self-same curate's own rector! The curate bein' of course unbeknown to the rector by sight. Well, I did the smart thing, if I says it myself, sir, by makin' straight for the rector to see if I could pick up any clues that way, and if that blinkin' rector 'adn't 'ave stopped to shave himself, we'd have caught the weasel asleep! But he happened just to have got up—or else some one tipped him the wink—and so he spots us out o' the window, waits till we had left the trap in charge of a senseless idiot of a boy, and then slips out by the back door, tips the boy sixpence, and drives off in the trap—we swearin' at him out of the window! I never swore in presence of a clergyman before, but he was swearin' 'isself, too, loud and proper! I can't 'elp laughin' a bit now, sir, when I thinks of the situation!"

Mr. Mason did not seem in the least amused.

"And what happened next?" he asked sharply.

address was Salchester, so I ups and offs to Salchester, thinking it just as well to be present likewise at that confab, supposin' it could be so arranged. My idea bein', you see, sir, as perhaps I might get on to Mr. Essington's track again that way."

"I see. Did you find Toothill?"

"I did, sir, and I takes some credit to myself too. Salchester is a biggish mark, seein' I didn't even know the aunt's name, much less her address. However, I 'ears there was to be a big fancy dress ball at a Mr. Dewhurst's, so I offs to the 'ouse, says I was a reporter come down from London to report the ball, and gets the butler to give me a list of the guests what was expected. And there was Mr. Toothill on the list right enough! Accordingly I waits in the crowd outside the door, what was gathered to see the ladies and genelmen arrivin' as kings and queens and red Indians and a knight in shinin' armour and 'Eaven knows what else. Presently up comes Toothill disguised as a pirit-king, pistols and black moustache and I don't know all what. But I spotted 'im right enough! And then I lights my pipe and settles down to watch that door till the bloomin' ball was over, even if it was to last till six o'clock in the mornin'."

He paused and transfixed his employer with an even more gimletty eye than usual.

"And do you know what 'appened, sir?"

Mr. Mason seemed to lack appreciation of dramatic effect.

"How the deuce should I?" he demanded. "Get on with your story."

Mr. Piggot, however, was not to be baulked of his drama. Lowering his voice, he hissed out the startling information.

"I waited till four o'clock, when they turned out the lights and shut the front door, and Mr. Toothill never came out of that 'ouse alive!"

"What! D'you mean to say he was dead?"

Mr. Piggot shook his head sombrely.

"I wish I even knew that much, sir. He simply vanished, same as Essington had done. And then I thought I 'ad better come straight on to you, sir, and report."

For a few minutes there was silence while Mr. Mason pondered over this singular story. Then he said:

"Well, Piggot, I can't say I feel very satisfied with your performance. You'll start again to-morrow, and this time you've got to nail Essington! In the meantime you had better go along and tell the butler to give you

some supper and see about putting you up for the night."

Bowler hat in hand, Mr. Piggot marched off in search of Mr. Cheal, while his employer sank into his easy chair very thoughtfully indeed.

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD FRIENDS

THE evening wore on, but instead of spending the greater part of it with his guest as usual, Mr. Mason sat in his library, smoking and frowning at the fire. He seemed to be debating some troublous point, alternately urging himself to a resolution and then shrinking from it. The clock had just struck ten when he was sharply aroused by a sound, cautiously made, but quite unmistakable. It was the sound of a window being drawn up, and to confirm it, a breath of outside air swept into the room. As he leapt to his feet, the curtains first bulged outward and then parted in the middle, and there emerged a distinguished-looking gentleman attired in a grey tweed suit and a pair of brown boots.

" How are you, Harry ? " said this apparition, holding out a friendly hand. " That's a devilish easy window to open."

Mr. Mason ignored the hand altogether.

Indeed, he seemed not to see it at all, so disturbing was the effect of this visitor.

"Francis!" he gasped.

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Essington in cordial apology, "didn't you know I was at large? I thought you had probably heard and would be keeping your fattest calf on the chance of my turning up."

"Yes, I—I did hear you had escaped," said Mr. Mason, perceiving the proffered hand at last, but grasping it rather limply, "but I—er—had no idea you would venture here."

"Venture!" said Mr. Essington. "Be hanged to you, Harry! Where else could I safely count on finding a pal who wouldn't give me away? My dear chap, we've given each other bad advice and led each other into evil company for nearly five and twenty years. 'If there's one fellow in this world who is too bad a hat himself to split on a fellow sinner,' I said to myself, 'that fellow is Harry Mason!'" He paused and looked his old friend up and down with some appearance of anxiety. "What's the matter with you?" he asked. "I'm dashed if I don't believe you think it's my ghost!"

Harry Mason made a brave attempt to laugh.

"I see it's your old self right enough, Francis!"

Mr. Essington shook a humorous head.

"Not my old self, Harry; a great improvement on it. My dear fellow, I've got a crack in my head at present that lets in new ideas literally by the dozen. My one worry is that I feel it gradually closing up. In fact, I'm beginning to get in a deuce of a funk of turning sane again."

"Oh! Ha, ha! Really?" laughed Mr. Mason, much more naturally this time, but with an eye half abstracted, half wary.

"After the life I have been living," Mr. Essington went on, "honesty will be a damnable nuisance and responsibility an unconscionable bore. Imagine paying one's tradesmen when one doesn't feel inclined to, or not kissing one's housemaid when one does! The trammels of perfect sanity will be the very devil. Whereas now . . . got a pretty housemaid, Harry?"

Once more Mr. Mason laughed, and each time he was doing it better and better. His eye also seemed to have come to some decision.

"Sorry I can't oblige you, Francis," he said, "but I can give you a room for the night. You've come prepared to stay with me, I presume?"

"I have certainly come to stay with you; but not prepared. It isn't entirely my fault,

I may mention. I've taken the trouble to steal two lots of luggage, but most unluckily lost 'em both."

By this time Mr. Mason had acquired quite a jovial air.

"You'll have a drink, Francis, won't you?" he cried.

"Several, thank you," said Mr. Essington, throwing himself into an easy chair and stretching out his legs. "These boots are borrowed, and a trifle loose. I know nothing that makes one thirstier than loose boots—unless it be loose lad — Hullo, have I frightened you away, Harry?"

Mr. Mason had pressed the bell during this last speech, and then (with a curious gleam of inspiration in his eye) started suddenly for the door.

"Afraid the bell may be out of order," he said over his shoulder. "I'd better tell Cheal myself."

He was out of the room just in time to meet his butler in the hall. His anxiety about the bell had been, it would seem, unnecessary.

"Tell Piggot to come here at once!" he commanded in a guarded voice, and then moving to the further end of the hall he waited, one eye on the library door. It remained closed, and he began to breathe a little more easily.

Mr. Essington, in point of fact, made no effort to follow his old friend, nor did he exhibit the least scepticism or concern, but lay back in his easy chair with his feet stretched to the fire till Mr. Mason returned. Even then his host was saved the necessity of any apology for his absence, for he began at once :

" Harry, old chap, if I were unlucky enough to have a conscience at present, it would have a weight on it. Did you ever hear of Miss Beatrix Staynes ? "

" Did I ever hear . . ." repeated Mr. Mason in a curious voice and with a still more curious look in his eye. " Why ? "

Mr. Essington stared at him in turn very hard.

" What have you heard of her ? " he asked.

" Heard ! What d'ye mean ? "

" I mean that you looked as if I had asked you whether you'd been picking my pocket —and as if you had been ! "

Mr. Mason laughed with remarkable vigour and very creditable success.

" My dear fellow, I was so utterly astonished to hear you remembering your duties ! She is your ward, isn't she ? "

" My first and I hope my last offence of that kind. The young minx seems to have run away with somebody."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mr. Mason with an expression of vast surprise. "Who did she run away with?"

"A gentleman in a fur coat, I believe. Those fur coats seem to play the devil with susceptible women, Harry. I really must invest in one myself. Not that astrachan has served me badly, but fur can be guaranteed to kill."

"You don't know anything more about the man?"

Mr. Mason was filling a pipe and scarcely looked up as he asked the question.

"Absolutely nothing; and that's where my conscience ought to be pricking me. It's my duty, Harry, to run this ravisher to earth."

At that moment the butler entered with a tray, but Mr. Essington went on without regarding him.

"The mysterious disappearance of the fair but frail Miss Beatrix Staynes . . ."

"Francis!" muttered his host, and indicated the servant with a frown. As he lit his pipe his hand was shaking.

"Harry," said his visitor when Cheal had left the room, "you are getting nervy. You really must join my pleasure trip! That fellow can never have heard of Miss Staynes."

"Oh, no—of course not—no, no!" Mr.

Mason admitted. "Still, my dear chap, I hate talking about—er—people one knows before servants. On principle, you know—simply on principle."

"I must remind you," said his old friend with a humorous smile, "that I have known you practically all my life, and your refreshing freedom from principles has always been your chief attraction."

"Not in matters like this," Mr. Mason assured him, "I have always been very particular about such things. Well, you were telling me about your ward's disappearance. When did you hear of it ?"

His guest helped himself to a whisky and soda, and during the minute that his back was turned, the mask slipped from Mr. Mason's face. He craned his neck forward as he stood before the fire, listening intently to each word, and weighing—it would seem—its import.

"During my recent retirement from the world," said Mr. Essington, "a very sick-looking lover in a well-cut coat brought me the news that his lady love had absconded with the fur-lined ravisher. Being her guardian, I looked as serious as my mental condition permitted, and promised to make inquiries. You haven't seen her, have you ?"

He turned and faced his old friend, his

tumbler in his hand. The mask was replaced on the instant.

"Me!" cried Harry Mason. "Why the deuce should you think I was in the know?"

"I merely wondered," said Mr. Essington. "The bereaved lover had got it into his head that your respected uncle, old Joshua H., had something to do with it. It sounded improbable, but supposing by any chance Joshua had taken to flapper-shooting, I thought it likely you'd been coaching him."

Mr. Mason shook his head and laughed very frankly and naturally.

"If Uncle Joshua has been on the war-path, it has been without consulting me, I assure you."

"Well," said Mr. Essington easily, "I can now at least say I have made inquiries and they have led to nothing. What guardian could do more?" He rose again, remarking, "Is that a cigar-box I see?"

As he turned his back again the mask slipped off once more. "Thank the Lord!" manifestly summarised Mr. Mason's first sensations, and as evidently his next thought was, "Has he told me the truth?" But when Essington returned to his chair, a cigar in his mouth, he saw the same genial old friend standing before the fire.

"A queer story!" the old friend observed. "And that's the whole of it, is it?"

"All but a few details, most of which I have forgotten. Oh, by the way, though, there was one rather rum little circumstance. There has been a fellow on my track who isn't one of Jenkinson's people at all—a rat-faced little chap, in a bowler hat like a sitz-bath. This very self-same fellow, it seems, was mixed up in the abduction of Miss Beatrix!"

Mr. Mason's eyes were very wary now.

"That—er—seems a very curious coincidence," he remarked.

"It isn't a coincidence," said Mr. Essington calmly.

Mr. Mason started.

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean that if I weren't on a pure pleasure trip and not worrying about trifles at present, I should say that there's some devilish queer game afoot, in which—the Lord knows how—I'm mixed up. However, I've come here for a quiet night, the loan of a razor, and your company, Harry, and be hanged to the beggar in the bowler!"

Mr. Mason laughed very confidently indeed, almost as if he were relieved.

"Finish your drink and have another, Francis!" said he, and taking his guest's glass he refilled it and handed it back. This

time it was Mr. Essington who watched his host, though in a very friendly and even sympathetic spirit it would seem, to judge from his eyes and the wrinkles round them.

"Harry," he said suddenly, "you are damnably worried about something to-night."

Harry Mason looked at him quickly.

"What makes you think so?"

"I don't think so: I know it. What's the trouble? Remember, I'm your oldest companion in crime; you couldn't shock me if you tried."

Mr. Mason did not meet his eye.

"It's only a little business worry," he said briefly. "Nothing to bother about."

"Well, old chap, if it's a lady, I'd woo her for you if you'd introduce me; if it's money I'd write you a cheque if anybody would cash it; and if it's an enemy I'd knock him down if I were big enough. You see I know the whole duty of a friend, and you can think the offer over. And now, I've been living the strenuous life lately—what about bed?"

There was no doubt that Harry Mason looked worried. For a moment he seemed too confused to speak. Then he recovered his laugh, though it was one of his poorest efforts yet.

"Finish that drink and have another before you go!" he cried. "Come on—I insist!"

"One of the reasons why I knew you were upset was the way you mixed my drink," smiled Essington. "This is nearly half whisky. No more, thank you!"

"Just a small one!"

"Do you want to make me drunk?"

"No, no, no, my dear fellow!" Mr. Mason assured him somewhat hurriedly and with great emphasis. "Why the deuce should I want to make you drunk, Francis?"

"I was wondering," said Francis.

His old friend laughed noisily at the bare idea as he led him from the room.

Mr. Essington shot him a curious glance, but made no comment at all this time.

CHAPTER V

Locked in

" All I need for the night," said Mr. Essington as he went upstairs with his old friend, " is a suit of pyjamas, a pair of slippers, and a clean handkerchief; especially the handkerchief. I've blown my nose on one hard-worked wipe for three consecutive days."

" I have told Cheal to get your room ready," said his host, " and you'll no doubt find everything except the handkerchief. I'll get you one of mine."

A fire was burning in the bedroom, a soft-shaded electric lamp lit it pleasantly, the pyjamas lay across the bed, the slippers lay beside it, the clean handkerchief was now in his pocket, and when Mr. Essington had said good night to his old friend and dropped into a basket-chair before the hearth, he congratulated himself very heartily on his judicious choice of a lodging for the night.

" I suppose old Harry is what the strictly virtuous would call a pretty bad egg, and

there's no doubt at all that at this moment he has got some peculiarly heinous crime on the place where his conscience ought to be," he said to himself, "but he's a first class pal for a fellow sinner in a tight place, and, by Gad, he does know how to make one comfortable!"

For a few minutes he indulged in these grateful reflections, and then, still sitting over the fire, he proceeded to take off his boots.

"I'd better put 'em outside the door," he thought, and carried them across the room. He laid his hand on the knob, turned it once, and turned it again.

"Locked in!" he murmured.

It was a very alert and wakeful Francis Essington who stood with his boots in his hand gazing at that locked door.

"By Heaven, I know now what was worrying Harry!" he thought, and it was as well his old friend was not there to see the expression that was on his face in that moment of realisation.

For a brief space he still stood there, thinking intently. Then his eye lit up, and prompt as ever he instantly pulled on his boots, rang the bell, and then sank into the basket-chair in the attitude of a man half asleep.

dim corridor, and as he lingered for an instant by the door to make sure that his guest within had not heard him, he seemed to catch one single muffled cry from some room down the passage. He held his breath and listened again, but there was not another sound to be heard.

"My d——d nerves!" he said to himself irritably, and stole away, and down to the library again.

There Mr. Mason mixed himself nearly as stiff a whisky and soda as he had given his guest, and then took out his watch and made a rapid calculation.

"If Piggot has wasted no time, they should be here in an hour," he said to himself.

* * * * *

While Mr. Mason was waiting cat-like round the corner, a grey figure was speeding on tiptoe down the long dim corridor.

"Can I reach the end before he comes back?" he asked himself as he fled. "No; too risky!" And in the same instant that he came to this decision, he opened the nearest door at random and shut it stealthily behind him.

"The devil and all!" he said to himself.

He was in a room faintly lit by a dying fire, and hardly had he closed the door before

a bed began to creak, very gently but quite unmistakably. Glancing down at his light grey suit, ghostly in the semi-darkness, Mr. Essington was visited by one of his most brilliant inspirations.

"I'll be a spook!" he thought, and whipping out his handkerchief, was about to throw it over his face, when with a sharp click, an electric light by the bedside was turned full on, and the adventurer beheld one of the most charming pictures imaginable.

A fair young girl with rippling hair and parted lips, her head upraised from a lace-edged pillow, was gazing at him out of a pair of pleading, frightened, tender eyes.

"Oh! . . ." she began.

"Hush!" whispered the adventurer urgently. "A thousand pardons! I've made a shocking mistake, but just give me five minutes' sanctuary, like a dear, good girl!"

"Who—who are you?" she asked, her voice instinctively almost as hushed as his.

To himself he said, "And who the deuce are you?" Aloud, or rather in a guarded whisper, he inquired, "Have you ever heard of Harry Mason's old friend, Francis Essington?"

What the resourceful gentleman proposed

to do was to declare himself either to be the said Essington, or Mr. Essington's doctor, come in search of him, according to the manner in which the name was received. Its actual reception, however, proved to be astonishingly outside his calculations.

"Mr. Francis Essington!" she exclaimed. "Why, of course—he is my guardian!"

"Your . . .!" Mr. Essington paused and gazed at her very hard indeed. "May I ask who you are?"

"Beatrix Staynes," said she.

"Beatrix Staynes!" he gasped.

"Are you Mr. Essington?" she asked.

"I am," said he, "and so . . ." He was about to say "and so Harry Mason is your fellow sinner!" But there was something so innocent, pure, and confiding in her face that his tongue was stayed. Even in that instant an inkling of the real truth flashed across his mind.

"My dear girl," he demanded, "how do you come to be here?"

"I am staying with Mr. Mason," she said simply. "My other guardian—Sir Joshua—wanted me to."

"The deuce he did!"

She sat up in bed and looked at him with sudden apprehension.

"Why--is—is anything the matter?"

"Merely that you are in the hands of a very thorough pair of scoundrels."

Her startled eyes opened wide.

"Scoundrels—Sir Joshua and Cousin Harry?"

"Cousin Blackguard!" said he.

Rat-tat came a gentle knock upon the door.

"My maid!" she whispered.

"Don't give me away!" he whispered back, and the next instant was flattened behind a hanging dressing-gown.

"Come in!" said Beatrix, a quaver in her voice.

Through a peep-hole in the lace of the gown, Mr. Essington watched the slip of a maid glide in—like some evil, bright-eyed little snake, he thought; and it seemed to him that in all his adventures he had scarcely been in quite so tight a corner.

"Pardon me, miss," said she, "but I thought I heard voices in your room. Could it possibly be?"

As she spoke, her black eyes were roving round the room. For a perceptible space they rested on the dressing-gown, and seemed suddenly to open a little wider.

"Voices?" said Beatrix. "Oh, no, Annette. . . ."

Her voice failed her in the midst of her

denial. The black eyes had fallen on a white object lying on the floor, and the next instant Annette had picked it up.

"A gentleman's handkerchief," she smiled. "How very strange!"

The hidden visitor watched her turn the handkerchief very deliberately in her hand till she could read the name on it. And then she smiled again; a smile of profound satisfaction this time.

"I beg your pardon, miss," she said with curious significance. "I see that there were no voices, after all."

And with that she laid the handkerchief daintily on the bed, threw a parting glance—wicked, humorous, and knowing—at the dressing-gown, and glided out again.

It was a surprisingly sobered guardian who stepped out into the room when the door had safely closed, and a trembling and bewildered ward who gazed up at him from the bed.

"What did she mean?" she cried.

Mr. Essington pocketed the handkerchief. "This was lent me by Harry Mason," said he. "His name is on it."

"But—did she actually think . . ."

She stopped abruptly, her face flushing scarlet.

"My dear girl," said he, with a gentleness

that would have vastly surprised most of Francis Essington's acquaintances, " don't worry—there's no need now; and don't think about it—I'll do that for you. Just give me the answers to one or two questions. When did you get that maid?"

" Just before I left Switzerland."

" And who engaged her for you?"

" My guardian—Sir Joshua."

" Mason's uncle! The man who sent you to this house! Do you begin to see?"

" You mean—she isn't to be trusted?"

" Not even as far as you can see her!"

" And—and Mr. Mason——?"

" You can guess the kind of scoundrel he is from this little incident. But you are quite safe now! Don't think any more about it. Tell me this, Beatrix. Did you write a note to Ridley, telling him to meet you at Victoria, instead of Charing Cross?"

" Never!" she cried. " Do you mean to say he got such a note?"

He nodded.

" Forged by your precious maid, no doubt —who is in Cousin Harry Mason's pay."

" Then Philip hasn't forgotten me?"

" He has been looking for you ever since."

" Take me away from here!" she cried.

Mr. Essington became the man of prompt—not to say headlong—action on the instant.

"I'll get into that wardrobe," said he, "and give you exactly ten minutes to dress. If you take one second more you'll have to bolt without your petticoat!"

And before she could even answer, the wardrobe door had closed upon her newly-found guardian.

Nine minutes later two stealthy figures were tiptoeing down the long corridor, while Mr. Essington's door still stood securely locked, and his host was dozing in the library, waiting for the arrival of Mr. Piggot and the police.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE GARDEN

"HOUSE-BREAKING is not very difficult—especially breaking out," said Mr. Essington, as he caught his descending ward in his arms under the gun-room window.

The sickle moon was two nights broader than it had been when he last left his host's mansion thus informally, and the still garden was barred alternately by brilliant moonlit patches and the inky shades of box and yew.

"Keep in the shadow as much as you can!" he counselled, as they stole down a long gravelled path.

They had left the silent house some thirty yards behind, and the hurrying girl, clinging to her guardian's arm, was beginning to breathe freely at last, when, of a sudden, the shadow of a yew just ahead was doubled by something that started from behind it. A broad figure barred their way, and the next instant a voice rang out:

"Beatrix!"

"Charles Toothill!" she gasped.

But already the aspect of Charles had changed from welcoming to formidable.

"Who is that with you?" he demanded. "Essington, by Heaven! Unhand that lady, sir! Unhand her instantly, or I knock you down!"

"Charles has evidently learned that by heart," observed Mr. Essington.

"Let go of that lady . . ." thundered Mr. Toothill.

The lady interrupted him urgently.

"Where is Philip?" she cried. "Is he with you?"

"He is watching the front of the house. But this man, Beatrix. . . ."

"Go and tell Philip I am here!"

Mr. Toothill's voice lost a little of its truculence.

"I—I can't leave you with——"

"Go and bring Philip!" she commanded, her blue eyes not at all gentle now.

"All right," said Charles submissively. "But——"

"Go!"

And Charles went.

"Our friend Toothill would probably make an excellent job of digging a drain, or pushing a mowing machine," observed Mr. Essington, who seemed to have entirely recovered from

his brief spell of serious-mindedness, and was already lighting one of his inevitable cigars. "I can also imagine him driving a hearse very creditably if the traffic were light, or even carrying luggage into a quiet temperance hotel. Another suitable vocation would be assistant to a three-card expert—the fellow who sits with his mouth open, planking down the firm's half-sovereigns *pour encourager les autres*. Or something in the smock frock and rattle line. . . ."

"Oh, I do hope he'll hurry!" sighed the slender figure by his side.

"By Jove, I beg your pardon!" said the guardian courteously. "I had begun to forget I was merely gooseberry in a young romance. Ah, here comes the lucky fellow! I would it were I, my dear girl, who is going to be kissing you within the next ten seconds!" And as she suddenly left his side and hurried down the path, he added with an air of great sincerity, "I would do it devilish thoroughly; she's a most uncommon pretty girl!"

Across the moonlit lawn, two black shadows rushed together, and then became but one.

"Lucky, lucky devil!" sighed Mr. Essington, and turning his back, strolled down the path with an unusually sentimental air.

A heavy footstep crunched on the gravel behind him, and a voice, less truculent

than before, but very stern and solemn, said:

"I wish to speak to you, Mr. Essington."

For a moment Mr. Essington surveyed his late victim in cool, embarrassing silence. Then with perfect, but very distant courtesy, he replied:

"I shall be very happy to hear anything you have to say for yourself, Mr. Tooting, and perhaps it would save time if it were to take the form of answering one or two questions in which I am interested. How do you and your friend happen to be here to-night?"

Nothing had been further from the mind of Mr. Toothill than to submit quietly to an examination himself, but the ascendancy established by Mr. Essington's dominating air and cool politeness was remarkable. For a moment he stared very hard and seemed to hesitate. Then he answered:

"Well, if you want to know, Ridley got a wire last night, telling him this man Mason's address, and sayin' he had a girl staying with him."

"I did want to know," said Mr. Essington, if possible still more courteously than before, "that, in fact, was why I asked. I am much obliged to you for the information. By whom was this wire sent?"

"Our lawyer, Mr. Perry. He has been making inquiries for us."

"So you have been accompanying Mr. Ridley in his quest?"

"Well," admitted Charles, "I suppose I ought to have said he was making inquiries for Philip."

"So I suspected. And what put Mr. Perry on to Mason's track?"

"Oh, we had our suspicions of him. Or rather," Charles corrected himself candidly, "it was Philip who suspected Mason. In fact, Philip has done the whole thing, while I was juggins enough to be lyin' low at Salchester."

"Has he discovered Mr. Mason's motive for this performance?"

"Well, Perry tells us—that's to say, tells Philip, that there are queer rumours in the city about Mason; goin' to be a smash, they say."

"Ah!" said Mr. Essington. "I begin to understand!"

"But, anyhow, thank Heaven, we've found Beatrix at last!"

"In Mr. Mason's custody?" Mr. Essington inquired gently.

"No—er—I suppose you got her out of it."

"It almost looked like it, didn't it?"

"Well, we are awfully obliged to you, then!"

"My dear Tooting, you are improving rapidly!" said Mr. Essington cordially. "Have a cigar?"

"Thanks very much, but—er—my name is Toothill."

"I shall never remember the difference," smiled Mr. Essington, who had apparently begun to find the strain of sustained dignity somewhat wearisome, "so I'm going to call you Charles, and the first bottle we meet, we'll have a drink on the strength of it."

Meanwhile, in the deepest shadow of the shrubbery, two voices were murmuring ardently and low, and two hearts seemed to grow more full of happiness with every moment snatched from the uncertain venture ahead.

"Where shall we go, Philip? What are we going to do now?" she asked at last.

"I haven't thought beyond this moment!" he confessed. "But Essington must be warned, and we must go somewhere for the night. I don't want to move. . . .!"

"But we must, Philip!" she sighed; and after deciding to move for several minutes longer, they moved at last.

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Essington, as he grasped the grateful lover's hand, "it

is I who am under a very deep obligation to you. But for you, I might never have made the acquaintance of one of the most charming girls it has ever been my luck to meet. Why nobody should have told before how pretty she was, I can't imagine! Did they actually suppose a guardian was going to interest himself in a ward who might have been forty round the waist for all he knew? Was it seriously imagined that he would take a plain child to the Zoological Gardens, or chaperon an ugly débutante?"

Philip listened to these speculations of his fiancée's guardian with the respect to which they were entitled, and then he said:

"Pardon my interrupting you, Mr. Essington, but I must tell you I saw that little spy in the bowler leaving the house over an hour ago."

The philosopher became the man of action again on the instant.

"This way!" said he. "Follow me; I know the country round here."

"What are we going to do?" asked Beatrix, as she hurried by his side.

"My dear child," said he, with a smile that made her swear by her new guardian for evermore, "we are going to try and make you happy."

She smiled up at him bewitchingly.

"I can never do enough to thank you, Mr. Essington!"

He looked down at her with ever-increasing approval.

"You can begin by calling me Cousin Francis," said he, "with the accent on the 'Francis,' and the 'cousin' as though you didn't quite mean it." And then in a tone of fervent regret, he added, "Why was I never told before? If they had even sent me your photograph, I'd have been a model guardian! It shows that it is always worth while having a look at a girl."

CHAPTER VII

A Princely Act

The spacious morning-room wherein Sir Joshua Horsham enjoyed the forenoon sunshine, the easy chair in which he sat, the orderly array of magazines and reviews on the table by his side, the fragrance of the superlative Havana which had kept him company for the past half-hour, all bore evidence of a prosperous past, and—one would say—an enviable present. Whenever he cared to raise his eyes from *The Times*, and glance out of the mullioned windows, trim lawns and a timbered park were there to gratify his taste for a dignified setting to a dignified gentleman; and yet, though his eye wandered constantly from the City page, it seemed oblivious this morning to sunshine or turf or flowers.

Among all his acquaintances, few had seen him look exactly as he looked just now. Possibly a good many other dignified personages would surprise their friends if they could

catch a glimpse of them alone meditating on a knotty problem. Sir Joshua had not infrequently been described as "benevolent looking." That phrase would not have been applied to him this morning. And a very singular resemblance might have been noted every now and then, as a certain expression came into his face. It was a resemblance to his nephew, Mr. Harry Mason, and not to Mr. Mason in his more cordial hours. And if an observer could have read his thoughts, he would have been struck by a still more surprising circumstance; for it was when his thoughts were running on Mr. Mason that his expression was most like his nephew's—and least benevolent. Once he even murmured audibly:

"The devil take Harry and his infernal schemes!"

The forenoon was wearing on, and he was still sitting with *The Times* opened at the same page, immersed in the same thoughts, when the door opened, and a butler, as dignified as the house and the grounds, uttered three words that seemed to hit Sir Joshua like a rifle bullet.

"Miss Beatrix Staynes!" he announced.

And then before the eminent financial magnate had time even to begin to recover from this shock, the same solemn voice announced:

"Mr. Mandell-Essington! Mr. Ridley!"

"How do you do, Sir Joshua," smiled Beatrix, her colour a little high, her eyes a little anxious, but her voice so sweet and irresistible that her guardian's first acute consternation seemed eased by the very sound of it. "I do hope you'll forgive us bursting in upon you like this!"

"Forgive you, my dear Beatrix?" cried her other guardian. "If Sir Joshua doesn't feel himself to be the most fortunate fellow either in or out of the City, I'll disown him! Aren't we a pair of lucky dogs, Horsham, to have such a ward? And here's the detested but enviable Ridley, who's going to take her away from us!"

Sir Joshua had begun to recover his wits by this time.

"I had hardly expected to see Mr. Ridley . . ." he began stiffly.

Mr. Essington interrupted him with gay good-humour.

"Now, now, Horsham!" said he. "We all know your savage bark, and the dear, good heart that wouldn't let you bite a butterfly if you tried! Philip Ridley is a very old friend of mine, one of the best fellows breathing, and literally made for Beatrix! I've brought them to get your blessing. I have given them mine. . . ."

"Yours!" snapped Sir Joshua. "At present you are incapable of any voice in the matter! I warn you . . ."

He was arrested by the look on Mr. Essington's face.

"What!" cried that gentleman, without a blush. "Haven't you heard that I have got my discharge? My dear fellow, I apologise for giving you such a shock. Yes, I'm now a sane, responsible guardian; awaiting," he added with a smile, "your congratulations."

Sir Joshua was staring at him very hard.

"You mean to tell me—seriously . . ."

Mr. Essington interrupted him, and there could be no doubt his feelings were injured by the suggestion of scepticism, though his air of forbearance was truly admirable under the trying circumstances.

"Do you actually imagine that I would venture into your house otherwise, and that these two honourable young people would come to bear me witness, if the fact were not as I have just explicitly stated?"

For a moment the two honourable young people began to look decidedly uncomfortable. They were relieved, however, to find that Sir Joshua seemed to take their evidence for granted. His momentary doubt was evidently, in fact, entirely satisfied.

" I—er—I am sure I am very pleased to hear it, Francis," said he, speaking slowly, and with an eye that revealed his perplexity at this development. " But of course the consent of both guardians is necessary, and I—well, my views, I am afraid, are somewhat different from yours."

Mr. Essington laughed genially.

" They were, Horsham, I know. But, my dear old friend, we must face facts. If you searched all England you couldn't find a more suitable husband for our dear ward than Philip Ridley—a member of one of the oldest families in the country, heir to a fine estate, one of the most brilliant men of his time at Oxford, and a first class all round athlete! What more could you ask ? "

Where Mr. Essington had obtained these facts will probably never be known. It was certainly not by asking Philip, who presented such a picture of extreme embarrassment that his eulogist felt it advisable to finish with an explanatory addendum.

" His modesty is so great that his astonishing record has literally to be wrung out of him ; which no doubt accounts for your scarcely realising Beatrix's good fortune when the engagement was first broached to you. But that is the man, Horsham, whom our ward loves, and what are we that we should

stand in the way of two young people's happiness?"

"Oh, you will consent, Sir Joshua?" cried Beatrix. "Won't you?"

Mr. Essington watched the effect of this appeal and immediately opened a fresh battery.

"I am aware," said he, dropping his voice confidentially, "that the action of a certain gentleman whom we need not name, has caused a little temporary complication, but as it might be somewhat unpleasant if the details obtained publicity, nothing more need be said once Philip and Beatrix have obtained our consent."

If Philip had been a picture of embarrassment, Sir Joshua was now a study in hesitation.

"I—must think——" he began.

"The thinking has already been done!" said Mr. Essington, still in a confidential voice, but now with his most charming and beneficent smile. "I have had a little talk with Harry Mason . . ." (Sir Joshua started violently) "quite confidentially, I assure you! I gather that there is some temporary financial embarrassment in the background. Now, my dear Horsham, I have this marriage very much at heart, and in order that *all* parties may feel the same pleasure in the

event, I have already given my stockbrokers orders to sell out £25,000 worth of stock, and that sum is at your disposal from the moment you have given your consent!"

This magnificent act of generosity produced—as can well be believed—the liveliest sensation in the three who heard it. Sir Joshua seemed divided between incredulity and joy, Philip murmured with feeling, "It's awfully good of you! But we can't really allow . . ." and Beatrix sprang up with very bright eyes indeed.

"Oh, Cousin Francis, you must let me give part of it! I have much more money than I need!"

"My dear girl," her guardian replied in a gentle and kindly voice, but with his back for the moment turned to his fellow guardian, and his left eye winking at her like a revolving beacon, "I also have more money than I need, and I should spend it much worse than you. It is a privilege to oblige my old friend Sir Joshua, I assure you!"

"Do you really mean this, Francis?" inquired Sir Joshua with emotion.

"You have a cheque form handy? Give it to me, together with a sheet of notepaper. When we have signed our names to our written consent to Ridley's marriage, I shall write you a cheque for £25,000!"

"And you say you have the money actually available?" exclaimed the astonished financier, and there seemed to be in his voice a trace of doubt whether such extraordinary fortune was not too good to be true.

"No cheque of mine has been dishonoured yet," said his benefactor with an air of calm dignity.

Unable to show her feelings by a contribution to the financial arrangements, Beatrix impulsively threw her arms round Sir Joshua's neck, and at this, any doubts and any opposition which might have survived Mr. Essington's unparalleled beneficence, disappeared entirely. In a few minutes the two little ceremonies were completed. Sir Joshua wrote down the specific and unqualified consent of her guardians to the marriage of Beatrix Staynes with Philip Ridley, and both in turn signed it. And then, in his usual rapid manner—just as though he were addressing a post card, Beatrix thought—Mr. Essington dashed off a cheque for £25,000.

As he handed it over with a courteous flourish, and turned away from the desk, her generous heart misgave her once more.

"Are you quite sure," she whispered, "that you can really afford all that money?"

"My dear girl," he whispered back; "I'm a certified lunatic—that's a mere bit of

waste-paper! But don't tell Philip till you've married him! He's one of those dashed conscientious dogs. They make devilish good husbands, however, I believe."

A hospitable invitation to stay to luncheon was immediately accepted by Mr. Essington for himself, but Beatrix was surprised to learn that her junior guardian had very thoughtfully made an appointment for her early that afternoon with his dentist in Harley Street, and still more surprised to discover that this arrangement was necessary in consequence of the severe neuralgia from which she had been suffering lately. Philip was equally surprised to find that he had kindly consented to escort her up to town, and the train, they learned, started in twenty minutes, so after bidding a cordial good-bye to Sir Joshua, they were escorted to their cab by Mr. Essington.

The moment he had got them apart, his manner altered in a very singular fashion.

"Jump into a cab the instant you arrive in town," he counselled urgently, "and get married in the first registrar's office you come to! Good-bye, and bless you both! No, don't wait to say thanks—off with you as quick as you can!"

"But why aren't you coming with us, Cousin Francis?" asked Beatrix, with a

note of disappointment that flattered her susceptible guardian exceedingly.

" My dear girl," said he, " it is probably a mere matter of hours before Mason turns up, and that permission will be cancelled five minutes later—probably by wire! I propose, if possible, to extend your time limit."

" But after what you've done, we can't let you be caught! " said Philip warmly.

" Neither can I," smiled Mr. Essington. " Good-bye, and good luck! "

In the sensational crash of the firm of Horsham & Stukley, which so startled the business world very soon afterwards, the curious episode of Sir Joshua's imprisonment in the tool shed was quickly forgotten, but at the moment it mystified his staff exceedingly. According to the best available accounts, their master went out for a stroll in the park with Mr. Mandell-Essington before luncheon; Mr. Essington shortly afterwards returned to say that Sir Joshua had suddenly discovered some reason (what it was, Mr. Essington offered no opinion) for catching the first train and paying a visit to his nephew, Mr. Mason; an hour later Mr. Mason arrived in a state of considerable agitation, to be told that he had crossed his

uncle *en route*; and soon after Mr. Mason had hastened home again, Sir Joshua was discovered locked into a tool shed in the park. As for Mr. Essington, that munificent gentleman had apparently vanished into space; nor did his handsome cheque appear on any record of the subsequent proceedings.

But two very happy people often thought of him; and, indeed, still think of him gratefully to this day.

THE END

Wyman & Sons Ltd., Printers, London, Reading and Fakenham